Small acts of self: practices of personal vignette games

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Some portions of this thesis appear in my previously published works. Excerpts from the following chapters can be found in these papers:

> *Chapter 4 - Henderson, Thryn. "Positioning in Personal Games: Perspectives of the Author-Player Persona in Memoir En Code: Reissue." Persona Studies 6, no. 2 (2020): 88-100.*
>
> *Chapter 5 - Henderson, Thryn, and Jo Iacovides. ""It's just part of being a person"—Sincerity, Support & Self Expression in Vignette Games." In Proceedings of DiGRA 2020. York, 2020.*

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To the creators who spoke to me, shared their games with me, and made games alongside me; thank you for helping make this thesis what it is, and for all the games you made or will make. You are making something wonderful.

Abstract

This thesis focuses on personal vignette games as a medium for sharing and exploring the self. It investigates the central thesis question, *how vignette games are used to explore personal experiences,* examining the creative potential of vignette games as a form of human connection, personal practice and poetic expression. The making of personal vignette games, and the circumstances which lead to their creation, are not often considered within the realm of game studies. However, the exploration of videogames as a personal, everyday and approachable art form is of vital importance to extending the conversation around the creative and social role of digital games.

Taking a mixed methods approach, the thesis breaks the central question into three sub-questions: *how does the personal vignette game portray an author's personal experiences, what are the authors' connections to the personal vignette game,* and *what is the significance of personal creative process.* The studies undertaken focus on three key elements that shape the way the medium is used to share personal experiences: the creators making them, the creative methods used, and the games themselves. Through a combination of close reading games, interviewing creators and creating personal vignette games of my own, I uncover dynamics of personal vignette games within the various contexts which shape them.

Throughout this thesis, I situate the personal vignette game within their private, playful and social contexts. I argue that the approachable, transgressive and often abstract form of the vignette game has helped this mode of digital self-expression to flourish outside the boundaries of what might be traditionally considered "game design". I explore the personal vignette game as a collection of shared perspectives through play, as well as a social connection and a free-form exploration of the self. I present also an ethos for approaching the personal vignette game, whether creating, playing or contemplating the works from a critical standpoint.

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Approaches of this thesis

“videogame” vs “video game”:

This thesis utilises both terms, as a way to distinguish between a playable physical/digital artefact and the larger commercialised culture that surrounds videogame development. *Videogames* refers to the artefact; the software and peripherals that make up the experience of play, the digital/physical object. *Video games* refers to the mainstream culture built around the production and consumption of *videogames;* the commercial industry, games as products, and the like. This choice was made largely as a response to the unnecessarily divisive discussion between various style guides on which term is correct. This choice also serves as a meaningful distinction between the *commercial industry and cultural identity* and *a-thing-we-can-play.*

Pronouns:

An imagined player has no need of a gender, and will not find one here. “They” is broad, grammatically correct, personal to myself, and much easier to read than the alternative offerings.

Approachability:

Rather than *accessibility* as a general term for how easy a thing is to use, this thesis uses *approachability*. Where accessibility has its roots in disability advocacy, works and studies, approachability is broader, and does not infringe on the important work being done around accessibility in games.

Payments for games and tools:

Where possible, tools and games that were played, used or examined within this thesis were paid for. Many are available for free, but with the option to pay the creator a suggested amount; where it was an option to do so, I have paid the creators for their tools and work. While, as this thesis argues, the personal vignette game thrives outside of capitalist ideals of games as a commercialised product, I am mindful of the value I gain from the work of others, and their need to pay their bills.

Publishers for game references:

The vast majority of games within this thesis are self published (focusing as I am on DIY, personal games), as are a number of zines and books I have drawn from. As such, I have forgone repeating “no publisher” in the footnotes, bibliography and ludography to make it easier to read. Publishers are listed where they do exist.

1. Introduction

> *Ultimately, if anything, a game is a dialogue — players speak to you in the breaths and pauses between the constraints you've created. This collaboration is precisely how something incredibly personal can become resonant and universal; the only way to truly reach out to others is through yourself.* [1]

The recording of personal narratives is a long established creative practice; the art of self representation is culturally familiar to many of us, running from self portraits and diaries, through confessional poetry and performances, to vlogs, blogs and twitter accounts. Whether the mode is written or visual, whether the work is literal or representational, people have produced images, words and records about themselves and their experiences through seemingly any and all available methods. In our increasingly digital world, then, it may not be surprising that game creation is offering a new form of personal, playful self-expression.

Though videogames are often considered in terms of their technical rules and systems, or their compelling fictional narratives, they can and do also offer a particularly playful, interactive, confessional potential to creators. From the Twine Revolution[2] to *That Dragon, Cancer*,[3] games implicitly or explicitly *about* their creator(s) are increasingly being used as a form of personal expression. Within game design and scholarship, autobiography and its position in games has become an area of increasing interest, with a variety of approaches examining the application of game techniques to personal narratives.[4] Providing a potentially unique perspective on designing narrative and play, games *about* their creators are growing in numbers and in popularity. This self representational narrative form has taken root in small, informally created games examining specific moments, sensations or peculiarities of existence, rather than recreating life events as long and linear narrative. These games exploring small moments of self are the personal vignette games that this thesis investigates.

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1 Elizabeth Sampat, *Empathy engines: Design games that are personal, political, and profound* (Createspace Independent Publishing, 2017), 11.

2 Alison Harvey, "Twine's Revolution: Democratization, Depoliticization, and the Queering of Game Design", *G| A| M| E Games as Art, Media, Entertainment* 1, no. 3 (2014); Jane Friedhoff, "Untangling Twine: A Platform Study", in *DiGRA 2013: DeFragging Game Studies*, DiGRA, 2013.

3 Gareth R. Schott, "That Dragon, Cancer: Contemplating life and death in a medium that has frequently trivialized both", in *DiGRA 2017*, DiGRA, 2017.

4 Mata Haggis, "Creator's Discussion of the Growing Focus on, and Potential of, Storytelling in Video Game Design", *Persona Studies* 2, no. 1 (2016): 20–25; Cindy Poremba, "Play with Me: Exploring the Autobiographical through Digital Games", in *DiGRA 2007: Situated Play*, DiGRA, 2007; Stefan Werning, "The Persona in Autobiographical Game-Making as a Playful Performance of the Self", *Persona Studies* 3, no. 1 (2017): 28–42.

1.1 Research question

Personal vignette games present a non-standard approach to videogames—generally small, scrappy, poetic games, they are made for highly personal reasons, which often disregard or purposefully defy conventional approaches to the design, audience, distribution or discussion of the games. The goal of this research, then, is to explore these unconventional approaches; the purpose and the practice of personal vignette games for those who make them, to expand the notion of game creation; to add depth to existing ideas of who makes games, and why. As such, the primary research question of the work—*how are vignette games used to explore personal experiences?*—is examined throughout via the sub-questions of *how does the personal vignette game portray an author's personal experiences, what are the authors' connections to the personal vignette game,* and *what is the significance of personal creative process.*

The research questions of this work approach the personal vignette game from a variety of investigative angles, none of which are focused on the technical creation or capabilities of personal vignette games. I investigate instead: who are the creators making these games; what is the vignette style, and where has it come from; how can these works be read or interpreted; and what are the motivations, outcomes and methods of self-expression driving their creation? Through examining the personal vignette game as an expressive and individually significant phenomenon, this research offers a vital insight into an expansive, creative and increasingly important subculture in video games, and their links to the values and motivations of autobiography as craft.

It would be helpful, before pursuing these questions through the rest of this thesis, to first establish what I mean by a *vignette* game. The term 'vignette' as applied to videogames is an extension of the term as used in other media—such as the vignette in art, film, literature, or poetry—adopted due to the style of games it describes. The Oxford English Dictionary[5] describes a vignette as "a brief verbal description of a person, place, etc." or a "short descriptive or evocative episode in a play, etc."; it is also commonly used to refer to a style of photography where the edges of a photograph are darkened and blurred, leaving only the central image in clear focus. In literature, a vignette is a passage or piece which provides details on a character, person or place which is not integral to a larger story—often heavily reliant on imagery and a sense of immediacy. In all cases, the vignette is a sketch, a description, of a moment in time.

5 "vignette, n.", OED Online, updated June 2021, Oxford University Press, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/223347?isAdvanced=false&result=1&rskey=Q56fZY&.

The videogame vignette takes something from each of these vignettes as used elsewhere; they present short, evocative episodes of play, centring a particular sense of character or place, blurring out the edge of the narrative. Rather than telling (or showing) the audience the whole of a narrative timeline from beginning to end, a videogame vignette paints a rich picture of a particular moment, perspective or mood. A history of the term itself, and the identifying features of the form, are discussed in Chapter 2.1.

This thesis is interested in *personal* vignette games specifically: that is to say, games that are using the vignette form to explore aspects of the author or moments of their life. I make this distinction from strictly *autobiographical* games to make clear that I am interested in any game focused on personal human experiences, or the clear presence of the author within it. Where an autobiographical game implies an implicit recounting of events or memories, a personal game might be more free-form; exploring ideas of the self more conceptually, presenting games about shared experiences, or presenting an autobiographical account abstractly. Personal vignette games, then, provide an ample field of study for the overlap of games and self-expression, as well as an opportunity to investigate the personal significance of intimate, evocative game design.

The personal vignette game is not necessarily an easy genre to find at first glance. That is not to say that it is not prevalent, however; though the specific term "personal vignette game" is not always used, games which fit the format it describes appear across *DIY games*, *altgames*, *artgames*, *trashgames*, *smolgames*, *notgames*,[6] and any number of other shifting subgenres. The personal vignette game, then, is an approach and a form rather than an explicit genre, existing under many monikers. Focusing on the specificity of human lives or moments in human lives, personal vignette games are exploratory or descriptive of a single experience or character. The presentation of narrative is often non-linear, abstract or environmental; user interaction is varied, unconventional and largely thematic to the narrative itself; interfaces between player and game are often minimal or non-existent. Stripped of traditional videogame design notions, vignettes may offer a unique perspective on self-expression through play and playful creation.

Despite—or perhaps because of—the technical and conceptual confines of the medium, vignette games use small modes of interactivity to explore socially and personally complex issues, ineffable experiences and the quirks or mundane reality of everyday existence. Personal vignette games are often used to explore self-portrayal within areas that mainstream

6 All of these terms were used by the creators interviewed in Chapter 5 to describe the personal games they make.

game design and culture has left little room for: physical and mental ailments, emotional expression, weaknesses, struggles, hurt.[7] This is not to imply that vignettes deal exclusively in realms of trauma: Siobhan Gibson's *FitBitch*[8], for example, presents a bold and bright flip-book style tale about deciding whether or not to attend a morning exercise class [Figure 2]; Marlise Chu's *Pick It Up*[9] sees us fight frantically with a sibling to grab food from a table in front of us [Figure 2]. Both of these vignette games offer a strong sense of the author's character through minimal interaction and a small moment. Whether they explore a specific part of an author's life story, or are more loosely crafted around the idiosyncratic thoughts, behaviours and experiences of the author, vignette games offer a great deal of room for nuanced narrative despite their inherent limitations of size and scope.

Figure 1: A screen of Siobhan Gibson's "FitBitch" after the player chooses to avoid the rain and stay at home.

7 Merritt Kopas, *Videogames for Humans: Twine Authors in Conversation* (Instar Books, 2015).

8 Siobhan Gibson, *FitBitch,* 2015, https://sgx.itch.io/fitbitch.

9 Marlise Chu, *Pick It Up*, 2017, https://marlise.itch.io/pick-it-up.

Figure 2: A screen from Marlise Chu's game "Pick it Up", showing a plate full of food and two animal's paws with chopsticks ready to take as much as they can.

The studies within this thesis provide a method for engaging with and reflecting on personal games that is concerned with the connections and contexts of personal stories made *by* creators who are inherently part of their works. Drawing on my own perspective as an informal game creator, my focus is largely on the communities and artifacts of the "Do-It-Yourself" or DIY personal games; utilising the free tools and low technical requirements of the games, creators are able to express themselves and form bonds with others through the practice of their game making. Throughout this thesis, particular attention will also be paid to the strength of the vignette game in regards to representation and creative freedom for marginalised communities. Vignette games offer a method of approachable and adaptable self-representation that has been adopted most readily by those pushed to the margins of the videogame industry, or those uninterested in its commercialised approach.

1.2 Thesis chapter outline

In Chapter 2, I outline the academic, cultural and creative space in which this research into personal vignette games takes place, to position it relative to the existing realms of playful autobiography found in live games, zine culture and digital feminist literature. I begin by exploring the concept of the personal vignette game, and the boundaries of the form. I then go on to provide the fringe historical and cultural contexts for the personal vignette game, to

establish where they lie in relation to video games as a craft, communities and industry. The chapter explores the influences of informal and DIY design on personal vignette games, and the lenses of poetic, avant-garde play through which the personal vignette games are best understood. With regards to the actual playing of personal vignette games, I also then establish the space between enjoyment and appreciation that this thesis is concerned with, and notions of narrative agency used to inform my later game readings.

Following this initial context chapter, Chapter 3 explores the methods used in this thesis to examine the personal vignette from a variety of connected angles, ensuring the research approaches the personal vignette game as a personal craft, and not only as an end product. I present close reading, thematic analysis and creative practice as the tools chosen to examine the personal vignette game, allowing for contextual connections to be drawn between the people, artefacts and practices that make up personal vignette games as explorations of self.

In Chapter 4, I present a close reading of *Memoir En Code*, a compilation game of autobiographical vignettes, reading for how game creators might relate their own story through a medium which relies primarily on another (the player) to execute. This chapter presents an approach for reading personal vignette games for autobiography and personal experience as presented through perspectives in play. I explore the problematic role of blurring and shifting lines between player and author through establishing a theoretical framework of player positioning—player-author as protagonist/protagonist-proxy/witness. I then interrogate how this player position facilitates a shared player-author presence in the game, providing levels of intimacy and distance to personal lived experiences in play.

From this play-focused examination of personal games, I then go on to explore the experiences of personal game creators and their own creative processes. Chapter 5 discusses creator experiences of facilitation, experimentation, disruption and expression as cornerstones of vignette game creation. Through a thematic analysis of interviews with creators exploring personal vignettes as they perceive and engage with them, I explore the personal, social and political contexts in which the games are made. This analysis of personal accounts outlines personal vignette creation as a creativity that primarily utilises design *through* positive restriction, *as* a playful creativity and *for* self expression.

Chapter 6 builds on the understanding of personal vignette games as experimental, restricted design with a present and playful author by examining the creative and self-reflection processes in progress. This exploration comes from a critical reflection of my own creative practice—the creation of a collection of personal vignette games called *rough edges*—which

explore my experiences of existence in relation to others, to particular spaces, and to my own body. The creation of these works, and the accompanying exegesis, explore impromptu, everyday creativity, and personal game design as a product of its circumstances. Through an examination of self indulgent and self reflective game works, the chapter presents personal vignette creation as a practice for its own purpose (a creative act undertaken for the sake of creating), and as a personal reflective dialogue (creating spaces for self-exploration and reflection).

The final conclusions in Chapter 7 connect these three studies, along with the contexts and history of the first chapter, to outline how the personal vignette game is used as a social, personal and playful craft to explore the self through various perspectives and poetic fragments. To lay out an overview of how the personal vignette game is used to explore personal experiences both practically and conceptually, I present an ethos for personal vignette games, drawn from the previous studies This ethos presents guiding ideas that reconsider ideals of games to allow for playful, everyday creativity as a form of connection, and emphasises the value of small, expressive design approaches and mundane content. I go on to discuss the dynamics which the games create and are created under, and the values of smallness and personal connection which open up new creative possibilities for who can make games, for what reasons, and how they can be facilitated in doing so. This ethos and dynamics section also prepare those interested in approaching the creation or study of personal vignette games to do so with nuance and respect, aware of their complex contexts.

This thesis as a whole is built around the consideration of personal vignette games as the sum of their many parts; as such, it is the culmination of history, research and practice together. As investigated within this thesis, many creators of vignette games have little to no game design or development training, with free and simple game making tools allowing a much lower barrier to entry than many other forms of game creation (see Chapter 4). I argue that the approachable, transgressive and often abstract form of the vignette game have helped this mode of digital self-expression to flourish outside the boundaries of what might be traditionally be considered videogame design.

In Jenkins' essay *Game Design as Narrative Architecture*, he argues for the existence of the poetic in games design, asserting that some games may be "an abstract, expressive, and experiential form, closer to music or modern dance than to cinema".[10] Though the essay is focused largely on the plot and character possibilities of videogames, the call to re-imagine their potential through the lens of music and dance is a pertinent one for personal vignette

10 Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture", *Computer* 44, no. 3 (2004): 119.

games. Throughout this thesis, then, I draw on Jenkin's comparison between games and poetic media. This is not only to consider the abstract, expressive and experiential possibilities of personal vignette games, and the ineffable emotions they may invoke—but also to examine the spaces they provide for improvisation during the creative process itself, and the personal fulfilment of engaging with personal creation.

My goal with this work is to encourage a more nuanced approach to the discussion of personal games, and a more meaningful engagement with the vignette form; one which considers the contexts of their creators and content as key to understanding them. I hope that by connecting game, creator and practice—three key aspects of personal vignette games as a form of self-expressive creativity—this thesis offers useful perspectives on personal, experimental and alternative game creation, and on the value of personal vignette games as both autobiography and videogame.

2. Context and theory for personal vignette games

are your videogames essays or poems?[11]

This chapter aims to familiarise readers with the terms, methods and essential concepts that have shaped the research that follows, as well as establish where the personal vignette game lies within existing work and research. As the genre is not often in explicit focus within academic spaces, much of the nuance of the discussion surrounding them must first be established. This context chapter, like the thesis as a whole, also explores the origins of vignette games through examining non-academic literature created by vignette game designers themselves—blog posts, articles and interviews are compiled alongside forum discussions, release notes, shared personal correspondences and event talks.

I begin this chapter, then, with an overview of the history of personal vignette games in section 2.1; firstly with a brief exploration of the vignette game as a form, then more specifically establishing the personal vignette game within a cultural history of DIY and video games culture. This section establishes the contexts behind the style of game in which this thesis is interested, and the community and creative roots from which the games and this research arise. This grounding section also highlights where the personal vignette game as a concept lies within the existing landscape of game creation and DIY creators.

Sections 2.2 and 2.3 of the chapter go on to provide insight into existing research and literature that scaffolds the approaches of this thesis, and the lenses through which I examine personal vignette games. Section 2.2 examines the personal vignette game's relationship with form and intent; this section explores the overlap between personal vignette games and the avant-garde games landscape, as well as the influences of poetic interaction on personal vignettes. I follow this in section 2.3 with a discussion of the lenses of enjoyment, appreciation, empathy and agency through which this thesis considers personal vignette games.

Section 2.4 concludes that the personal vignette game, though complex to isolate as a particular form, has a number of identifying characteristics—of form, content and methods—by which they are identified throughout this thesis.

11 @moshboy "are your videogames essays or poems?" Twitter, 12 January, 2019, https://twitter.com/moshboy/status/1084233190087127041.

Like many creative forms, there is no one path to the emergence of the personal vignette game specifically. This chapter, however, offers a glimpse into the complex paths that led to personal vignette games as they currently exist, touching on hypertext fiction, poetry, film, zine culture, informal game design, and experimental art. This section, then, provides a handful of the prevalent or particularly illustrative influences orbiting the form, as a reasonable grounding to understand personal vignette games within a larger context.

2.1 A brief history of personal vignette games

In 1997, artist and writer Shelley Jackson published *My Body, A Wunderkammer* through the Alt-X Online Network.[12] The work is a hypertext narrative built around a series of written vignettes, each one accessed by clicking a different section on a sketch of her body [Figure 3]. Jackson is not, to my knowledge, a game designer (though I'd be delighted to hear if she considers herself one)—she describes the work as a "semi-autobiographical hypertext combining text and image" [13] All the same, the work shows remarkable similarities to a number of the contemporary personal vignette games explored in this thesis. Readers are invited to know more about Jackson through reading the thoughts, feelings and memories presented alongside select parts of her body; it is, arguably, an early experimentation with the personal vignette game form. *My Body, A Wunderkammer* presents an ambiguously personal game, giving a sense of the creator through minimal interactions.

My Body, A Wunderkammer is likely not the first interactive personal artwork, nor is it the quintessential form: there is a history of playful, interactive personal works exploring the self through non-traditional mediums, each as varied from the others as the next. For instance, throughout the 2010s, personal games were a frequent occurrence of the "Twine Revolution";[14] a brief but explosive era of experimental hypertext game creation and academic curiosity. Many of those personal Twine games are formed around encapsulated moments and fragments of the author's own character. The games *Scarfmemory*,[15] *There Ought To Be A Word*,[16] or *Birds*,[17] for example, all present specific aspects of the author's relationship to the world around them through a particular lens; respectively, losing a personal item, navigating

12 Shelley Jackson, *My Body — a Wunderkammer,* 1997, hypertext, Volume One, Electronic Literature Collection, https://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/jackson__my_body_a_wunderkammer.html.

13 Jackson.

14 Alison Harvey, "Twine's Revolution: Democratization, Depoliticization, and the Queering of Game Design", *G| A| M| E Games as Art, Media, Entertainment* 1, no. 3 (2014)

15 Michael Brough, 2013, http://www.smestorp.com/scarfmemory.html.

16 Jeremy Penner, 2013, https://www.glorioustrainwrecks.com/files/datingsim.html.

17 Kitty Horrorshow, 2013, https://philome.la/kittyhorrorshow/birds/index.html

dating after a significant break-up, or watching the birds. They present, then, as personal vignettes.

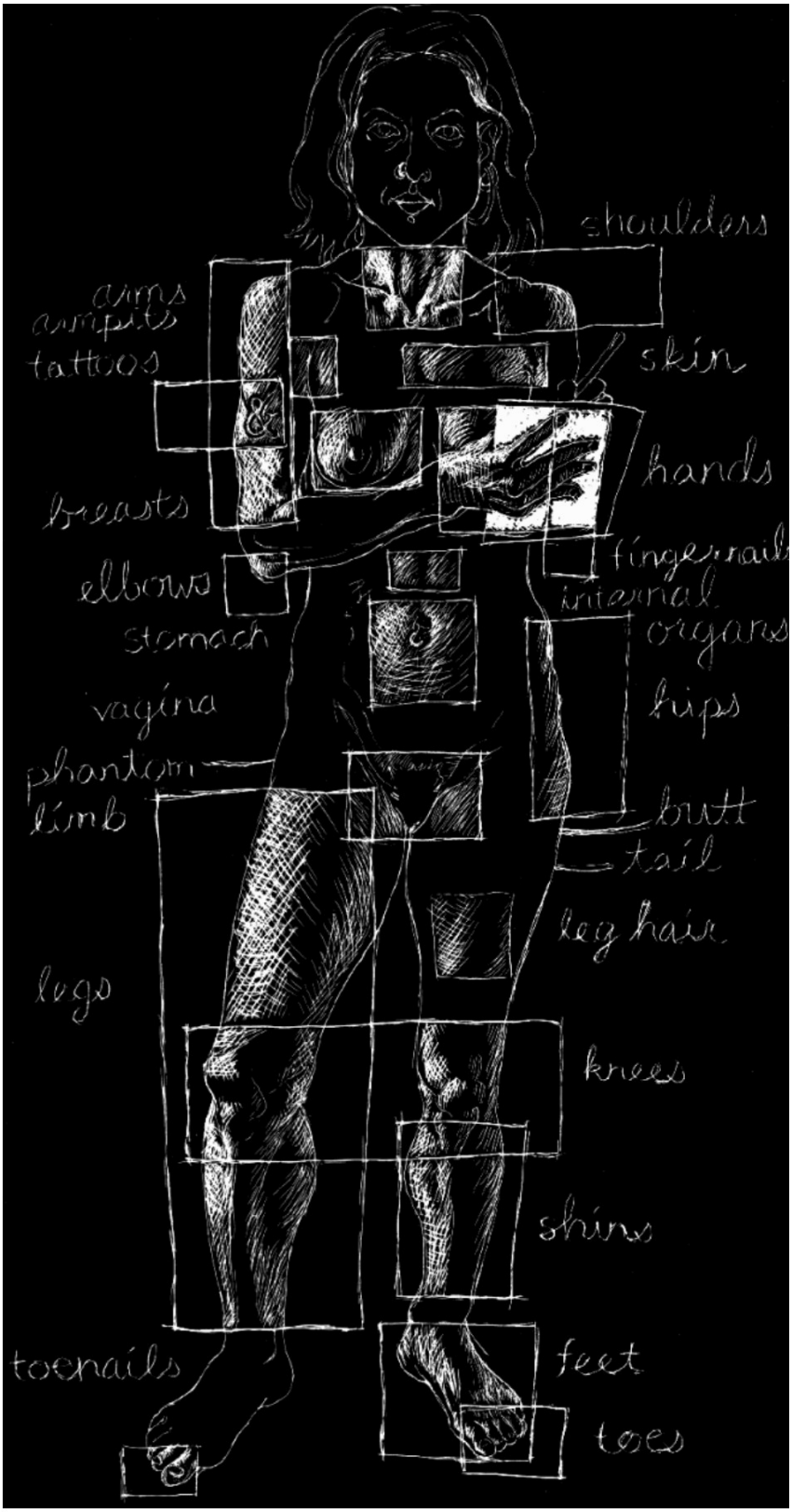

Figure 3: The main screen of "My Body, A Wunderkammer", showing a sketch of a body with labelled boxes around the parts through which the texts can be accessed.

Playful, encapsulated exploration of personal experience is not confined to the screen, either: Lizzie Starks 2014 LARP *In Residency* and 2013 tabletop roleplaying game *The Curse* both

explore aspects of personal experience through improvised live play;[18] Marshall Bradshaw's 2018 semi-autobiographical LARP *A Political Body* does the same.[19] While they are not vignettes in the form which this thesis explores, they do each develop a particular mood or tone through their play, and are focused on specific aspects of lived experiences. They illustrate the larger shift within game design spaces toward exploring the self through abstract, focused play.

Though there are a number of prominent works and influences of the personal vignette game explored within this chapter, many more will exist. There have been games lost to the complexities of digital archiving, personal games that never made it to public display, and any number of inspirations that have not been publicly named or mentioned. The personal vignette game as a form has been shaped by the history of personal, expressive creativity that precedes them; the contexts provided within this chapter are one snapshot of the complex roots from which personal vignette games arise.

2.1.1 The vignette game form

As briefly introduced in Chapter 1, the videogame vignette is a companion to the vignette in other media, sharing their aesthetic and narrative sensibilities albeit in a new form. A vignette in theatre, literature or poetry is a short and evocative piece, concentrated on portraying a sense of character or place; a videogame vignette does the same. A photographic vignette blurs the edges of the view so only the centre of the piece is in focus; though the videogame does not treat the screen this way, it does conceptually blur the edges of the game.

Though the brevity of the videogame vignette is one of its defining features, it is their evocative essence and their blurred edges that help to identify a vignette game, rather than the more measurable attributes of length. While vignette games may have similarities with other short-form mediums, they are less focused on action or drama than *flash fiction*,[20] for example, and present more focus on imagery than the similarly evocative *game poems*[21] Vignette style works provide imagery and symbolism over plot, establishing a mood or tone within a small, expressive space. Vignettes do not need to connect to other ideas or stories, and are often presented as stand alone experiences.

18 Lizzie Stark, "Designing Autobiographical Games", *Leaving Mundania* (blog), 30 March, 2015, https://leavingmundania.com/2015/03/30/designing-autobiographical-games/.

19 Marshall Bradshaw, *A Political Body*, https://alchemicalspill.itch.io/a-political-body

20 *Flash fiction* is a short piece of fiction (ranging anywhere between six words to a few thousand) that offers some form of character or plot progression. Often flash fiction hints at or implies a connection to a larger story.

21 *Game poems* are short written games providing evocative, often impractical or impossible rules of play.

These principles translate into the digital games sharing the moniker, encompassing the ideal of vignettes as established elsewhere; they too are short, expressive experiences, crafted to highlight specific moments, feelings or senses of character. In this intensely focused, narratively untethered form, vignette games may seem almost primarily defined by their absences—like their namesakes, they lack the harsh edges of back-story, resolution, or linearity. Seemingly closer to photography or paintings[22] than mainstream videogames, they provide a snapshot of a narrative without explicitly advancing or resolving it, often declining to provide the player a wider context of the world. They differ also from *mini-games*, most notably in that they eschew traditional videogame objectives. Mini-games, while also short and narratively untethered, tend to centre the presentation of a game mechanic rather than a mood, tone or character. Vignette games often abstain from, or decenter, challenges or rewards such as scoring points, win/fail states, or narrative 'quests'. True to their 'snapshot' nature, they also often decline to provide a clear final goal or definitive, narrative ending.

As previously mentioned, although vignette games are brief by their nature, timescale is not the primary factor of definition. While vignette games would all be considered 'short' in comparison to an AAA release (which often advertise between 30-60 hours of gameplay) or the seemingly infinite playtime of sandbox games, the playtime of many games within the vignette genre are not comparable. Vignette games take a conceptually minimalist approach, and while they are often brief, the more defining factor is not literal time, but the restraint present in the game space, narrative and interactions presented. With games offering experiences ranging between mere seconds to much more expansive pieces allowing for a few hours (depending on the player's commitment to 'complete' play), 'short' is too vague a term to be useful. 'Encapsulated' is perhaps a better fit; by narrowing the experience to one scene, one aspect of character, or one memory for example, the vignette game can then offer a rich atmospheric depth to the fragment it depicts.

Though the vignette is a well-established concept across many forms of media, the use of the term in conjunction with videogames remains relatively new. While personal and expressive videogames of the same ethos predate the label, it is only in 2008 that Ian Bogost dedicates one of his Persuasive Games columns to the idea, exploring "how vignette might be used successfully in games"[23]—although the article is interested more in "vignette-styled video

22 Simon-Albert Boudreault, "Small Games, Big Feels: Storytelling with Vignettes" (Presentation, Game Developers Conference - Narrative Summit, San Francisco, 27 February 2017).

23 Ian Bogost, "Persuasive Games: Videogame Vignette", *Persuasive Games* (blog), 2008, https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/131942/persuasive_games_videogame_.php.

games". Amongst small game designers and indie games journalists, the "vignette game" as a form only began to surface noticeably in 2014, often alongside personal game works.

Perhaps due to the lack of strictly quantifiable game design features, it can be difficult to distinguish between what is a vignette game and what would fall into another short or abstract game form. Unguided, exploratory, free-form narrative games such as *Dear Esther*[24] and *Gone Home*,[25] for example, share much in common with the emotional landscape and interpretive qualities of vignette games, presenting primarily as mood pieces exploring particular tones and feelings. Both games, though, offer a narrative plot with a narrative resolution to investigate, as players discover the past events that took place in each game to uncover the mystery surrounding each location—it is perhaps the act of investigating these prior events to establish a narrative which sets them apart from pure vignette games. Though there is a notable style overlap with vignette games, they have instead been termed 'Walking Simulators' (among other titles) as games promoting a slowness in play, focusing on unguided player exploration and assessment of environment clues.[26]

2.1.2 Personal vignette games and DIY games culture

The term "personal vignette game" specifically, in the context of videogames, is used most prominently by game creator Nina Freeman. Discussing and categorising the nature of her own personal works, Freeman identified the 2014 games *Ladylike*[27] and *How Do You Do It?*[28] as personal vignettes inspired by her own childhood experiences.[29] Relating her work closely to works of confessional poetry, Freeman described this style of game design as the intention to tell a story in extremely minimal ways, defining her interpretation of the vignette game being a one-focus game.[30]

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis in Chapter 1, personal vignette games do not all present "personal" content in the same way. Some may explore a specific part of an author's life story, others may be more loosely crafted around the idiosyncratic thoughts, behaviours and experiences of the author. Regardless of the specifics of the personal content, however,

24 The Chinese Room, *Dear Esther*, The Chinese Room, Microsoft Windows, 2012.

25 The Fullbright Company, *Gone Home*, Fullbright, Microsoft Windows, 2013.

26 Hartmut Koenitz, "Beyond "Walking Simulators"–Games as the Narrative Avant-Garde", extended abstract, in *DiGRA 2017,* 2017.

27 Nina Freeman, Emmett Butler, audio by Decky Coss and art by Winnie Song, 2014, http://ninasays.so/ladylike/.

28 Nina Freeman, Emmett Butler, audio by Decky Coss and art by Marina Kittaka, 2014, http://ninasays.so/howdoyoudoit/.

29 Cara Ellison, *Embed with Games* (Birlinn Ltd and Polygon, 2015).

30 Nina Freeman, "Cibele: A Vignette Game" (Narrative Innovation Showcase, Game Developers Conference, Narrative Summit, San Francisco, 14 March 2016), http://www.gdcvault.com/play/1023381/The-Narrative-Innovation.

they all present players with a projection space for their own assumptions and interpretations, alongside the creator's own curation of identity. As Werning discusses in his investigation of persona in autobiographical games, the persona of the author is built not around a character, but instead a constellation of the game's mechanics, narrative and rules.[31] That is to say, the sense of the author pervades the game in its entirety, and is not dependent on a fully realised game character to represent them. In this vein, this thesis will argue that despite their inherent limitations in size and scope, there are clear benefits when creating personal games in the vignette form. With their fluid form and expressive potential, they provide a strong platform for games where both narrative and mechanics are rooted together in self-expression, without the need for the personal content to appear as re-enactments.

Personal vignette games are not, in any measurable sense, the backbone of the video games industry. They are not made by prominent studios, backed by large publishers, or sold in vast quantities (or even, often, sold at all). This is not to imply a failure of any kind on their part; this fact does, however, locate them outside of what many would traditionally consider "video game development", even outside of the (increasingly unspecific) moniker of "indie" games. Where many of the games and creators within this thesis find their roots instead is the realm of informal, Do-It-Yourself, zine-like games. These are games made, often by those not traditionally trained in game development, using free tools and assets to express themselves through play. To understand personal vignette games in the context of their usual creation, then, an understanding of DIY cultures is a good place to start.

DIY crafts provide opportunities for both personal expression and a critical reflection on culture. For example, the construction and swapping of zines (self-published, miniature magazines) circumvents the traditional publishing and purchasing modes of consumerist culture. Doing so empowers individuals to insert themselves into narratives and redefine their positions within existing power structures. In this act of transformative creation, makers establish affinity groups and provide each other with a better understanding of power, representation and access—narrowing gaps between those who control media and those with the power and possibilities to create it.[32] Creating DIY artifacts is thus also a way for makers to participate in a *social creativity*, which reinforces the importance of social bonds by sharing, gifting and publishing their creations. Social creativity is seen when creators transform intangible relations and social bonds into reconciled, tangible DIY artifacts—such as games—

31 Stefan Werning, "The Persona in Autobiographical Game-Making as a Playful Performance of the Self", *Persona Studies* 3, no. 1 (2017): 28–42.

32 Yasmin B Kafai and Kylie A Peppler, "Youth, Technology, and DIY: Developing Participatory Competencies in Creative Media Production", *Review of Research in Education* 35, no. 1 (2011): 89–119.

enabling an assertion of self into market-centric world spaces.[33] By transforming the minutiae of everyday life and objects into constructs representative of social bonds and experiences, DIY crafts and media mitigate social isolation and the perceived or actual fragmentation of social networks.

In relation to game creation, there are a number of tools providing potential creators with approachable access to digital creativity and personal expression that is characteristic of DIY culture, while removing many of the technological barriers that may hinder the novice personal game designer. From *Puzzlescript* and *Flickgame* to *Bitsy*, it is possible now to make a wide range of games at no cost, and distribute them online; all with no programming experience required.[34] *Twine* (originally developed by Chris Klimas in 2009)[35] may be one of the most ubiquitous examples of informal, DIY game design tools. *Twine* is a free editor for interactive fiction which allows created games to be exported to web files widely compatible with web browsers. It provides users with a visual user interface and reference manual that focuses not on code and technical capabilities, but primarily on aesthetic and the value of digital storytelling. With no cost barrier, and a focus not on what you can make but why you should make it, *Twine* has fostered a sprawling community of creators putting out a consistently personal style of creative, text based games.[36]

Similar DIY games tools have emerged as more community focused, completely contained systems—the games are made, shared and played all in one place. Notable examples of these DIY games microcosms come from the four-person Utrecht studio *sokpop collective*. Their 2019 tool *sok-stories*, commissioned by the London games festival *Now Play This*, was intended as "widely-useable" with a "make-and-share vibe".[37] Arguably, both aims were achieved, as more than 1,600 stories were made and shared in its first year. The tool allows users to draw simple 2D sketches on a white background, then create rules for combining those sketches into new ones by dragging and dropping sprites on top of each other [Figure 4]. Although the rule set was envisioned as simple and easy to engage with—combine one object with another object to create a third, new, object—the loose guidance around how the system should be used has allowed for a variety of experimental game styles to emerge. The team followed this

33 Steven Chen, and Jennifer D. Chandler. "Design it, your self-experiences (DIY): Social creativity and the social function of DIY experiences." *ACR North American Advances* (2010).

34 Anna Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-Outs, Queers, Housewives, and People like You Are Taking Back an Art Form* (Seven Stories Press, 2012).

35 Chris Klimas, "Twine / An Open-Source Tool for Telling Interactive, Nonlinear Stories", Twinery, n.d., https://twinery.org/.

36 Jane Friedhoff, "Untangling Twine: A Platform Study", in *DiGRA 2013: DeFragging Game Studies*, DiGRA, 2013.

37 Ruben Naus, personal communication, February 2020.

up with *sok-worlds*, a cut-&-paste collage tool that creates 3d worlds from stock images, in another closed ecosystem of game creation. Both tools, although they are not explicitly for personal game creation purposes, have seen personal-style, slice-of-life games feature significantly.

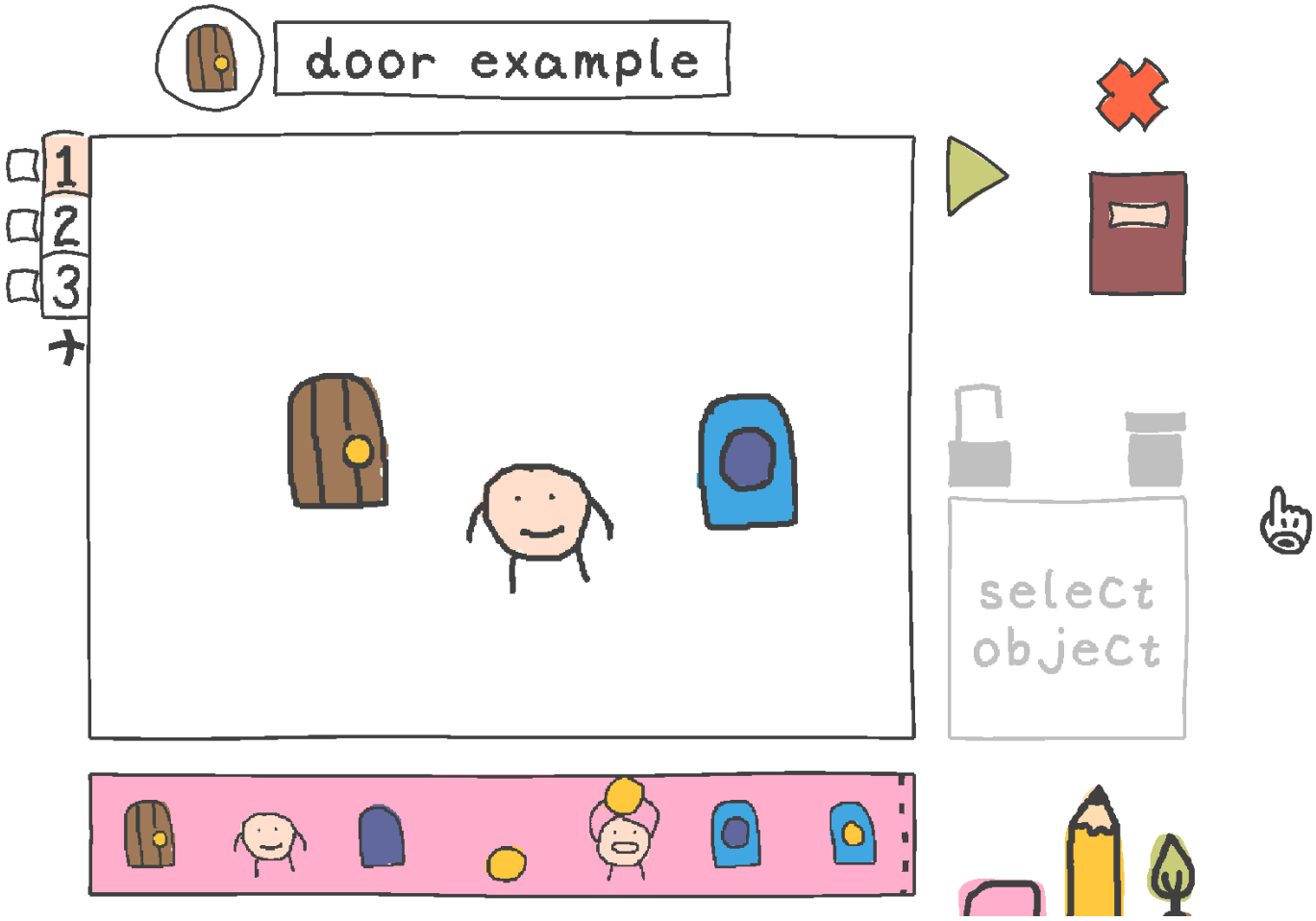

Figure 4: A screenshot of the colourful and child-like sok-stories workspace, showing the "door example" game being edited.

Along with low-intensity tools, events designed with ease of participation in mind have also played a part in the evolution of the personal vignette form. A number of approachable, low-intensity, community or art focused game jams, for example, have allowed new interested creators to get involved. Using tools like those described above, alongside prompts and support provided by the game jam hosts, small scale game jams can be a pathway into telling stories in short and abstract forms. Some game jams have become a core component of the efforts to build larger communities of more diverse game makers, aiming to empower makers by instructing them on creating a digital game artifact by using fixed duration sessions. The goal of many of these jams is not on the polish or technical achievements of the games, but on building diverse networks of creators from these new voices, who will share their

accumulated knowledge and support one another in their efforts.[38] The interest lies in the human connection and the potential for self-expression, and in the spaces created for intimacy and insight.

The 2016 *Flatgame jam* is exemplary of this ideal, encouraging participants to try and make their first ever game for the event [Figure 5]. Creators were prompted to base their games on a personal memory or event from 2016. The jam provided participants with a complete Unity project, set up for authors to drag and drop in their hand drawn art and text. In the host's own words, "all you need to make a game and to present an idea is a couple hours, a laptop, and some markers".[39] The *Flatgame* as a specific style took hold after the jam, and in 2021, the creators of the *Flatgame jam* went on to provide their own custom tool to make games, so that creating a Flatgame became more straightforward. This tool, in addition to the pre-existing mobile flatgame tool *Flatpack* (by approachable tool creator Mark Wonnacott, publishing as candle), allows for less complicated access to game creation spaces. Through these playful, democratised events, and the tools that form around them, a growing number of personal vignette games also emerge.

Outside of game jams, social communities are also growing, focused more on connection between creators and slower paced making. For instance, the *Devs of Personal Games* discord (an online chat room founded in April 2019) attracted around 100 members within its first year. Founder Marina Díez states that the aim was to foster a community interested in democratising tools and creating games about their own experiences.[40] Alongside growing communities interested in personal games have come community sourced resources for the individual creator to start their own creative journey.[41] Through these low pressure, creative community efforts, creators can find an approachable, social entry point to game creation, often working outside of common game genre expectations; within these spaces, personal games feature heavily. It is possible, then, that easy access to creation leads to the use of abundant, close inspirations—the creators themselves.

38 Emma Westecott, "Independent Game Development as Craft", *Loading… The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 7, no. 11 (2013): 78–91.

39 Llaura Dreamfeel and Breogán Hackett, "FLATGAME Annual 2016", 2016, https://itch.io/jam/flatgame-annual-2016.

40 Marina Díez, personal communication, February 2021.

41 Vaida Plankyte, "Personal Games Resource List", *Itch.io* (blog), 4 December 2015, https://itch.io/t/10237/personal-games-resource-list.

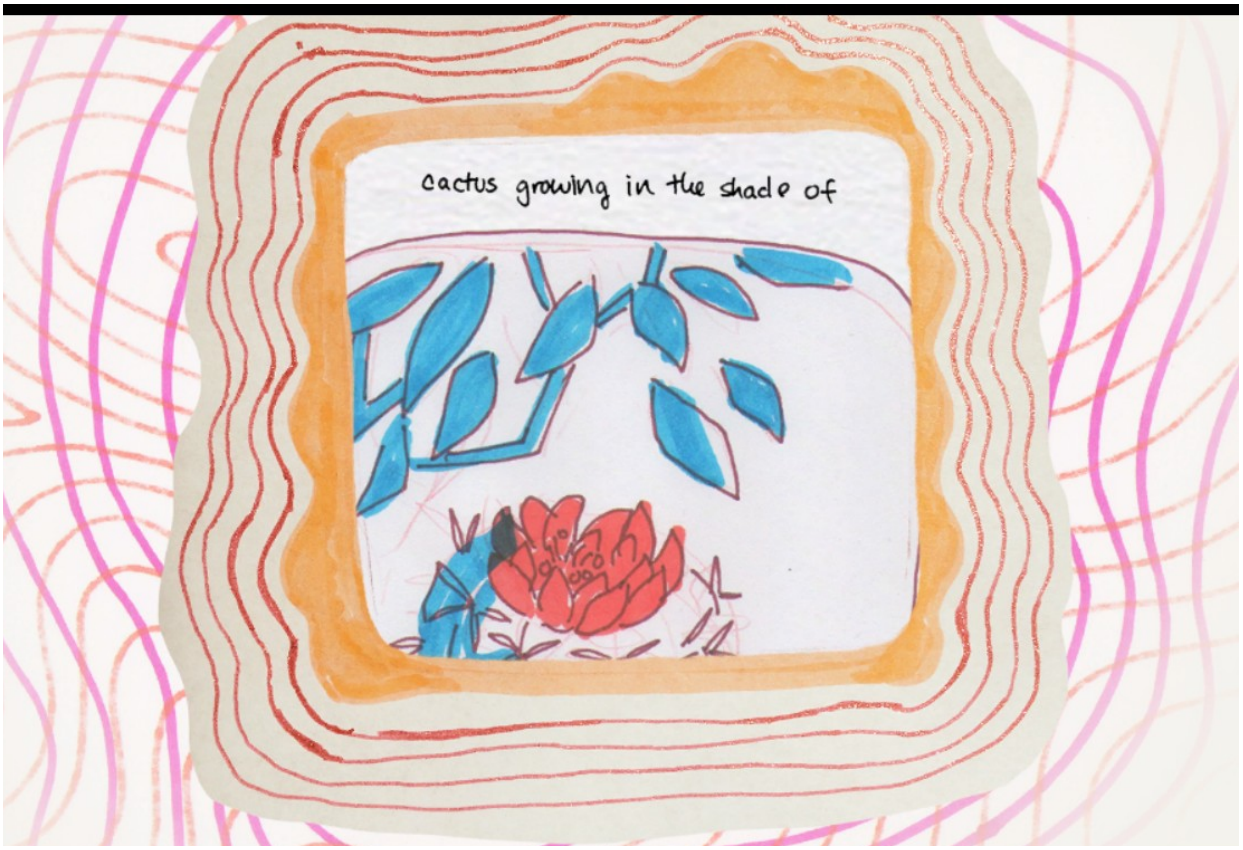

Figure 5: A screenshot of the Flatgame "Cavern" by itch.io user birdstare, from the 2016 Flatgame jam.

2.1.3 The personal vignette in wider video games culture

In the mid 2010s, the term "personal vignette game" also started to appear in wider games culture as part of games criticism. A 2014 *Kill Screen* article, for example, titled "The heartache of a breakup in videogame vignettes"[42] muses on five vignette style games themed around the end of relationships, released closely together by prolific game designer Stephen Lavelle. Much of the article is spent wondering about their potentially personal nature (undisclosed in the games themselves), and what their poetic, expressive performance might mean to Lavelle.

As personal vignette games increase in popularity and visibility, they bleed from the previously explored DIY games communities into the realm of formalised video game creation and curation. Commercial taught courses, such as the 2020 "Getting Personal: A Hands-On Guide to Making Personal Games" at Berlin's School of Machines, Making & Make Believe, offer to introduce students to their "own inner powers of exploration and self-expression."[43] A number of personal vignette games were provided in an accompanying playlist to illustrate the concept of personal games for attendees.

42 Chris Priestman, "THE HEARTACHE OF A BREAKUP IN VIDEOGAME VIGNETTES", *Killscreen* (blog), 11 March 2014, https://killscreen.com/previously/articles/breakup-games/.

43 School of machines making & make-believe, "Getting Personal", accessed 21 May 2021, http://schoolofma.org/getting-personal.html.

This growing fascination with personal vignette games, and their inclusion into games as art canon, is perhaps best exemplified by the recent rise in short personal games being displayed in public exhibits. For instance, the 2020 exhibition *System Link: Videogame As Memoir* by the VGA Gallery was dedicated exclusively to exploring short, independently produced personal games. The showing included games such as the personal vignette game *Friary Road*,[44] which portrays a brief glimpse of an intimate personal conversation between partners Ao and Bo, stargazing in their garden after a barbecue. The exhibition presented personal games specifically as tools for authors over objects for players:

> While film, music, writing, and other media have historically been vehicles of memoir and personal storytelling, games often maintain a trajectory as products of their audience and not their creator. The voices of the individual artists have recently begun to break through the standards of generalization in the medium, creating stories where players are able to experience the emotional perspectives of the creator.[45]

In such exhibits, personal vignette games are also held up alongside other larger videogame genres as an artifact of equally meaningful game design. For instance, the inclusion of Jenny Jiao Hsia's works (published under q_dork) in the 2018 V&A exhibition *DESIGN, DISRUPT, PLAY* saw short and cheerful personal vignettes around yoga routines and makeup application presented side by side with the "games as art" cultural touchstone *Journey*. The personal vignette game also makes itself known in more commercial game design spaces, albeit infrequently. The 2016 release *That Dragon, Cancer*[46] for example, is composed of short individual scenes, exploring the creators personal experiences coming to terms with their son's terminal cancer prognosis. Moving players between times, places and perspectives as they play, these vignette scenes create an effective, abstract experience of the author's experiences of helplessness, and a loss of control.[47] Showing players small moments both light-hearted and tragic, the game is surreal, poetic and highly focused on the emotional landscape of each scene. Though it is not marketed as such, the game fits neatly into the sensibilities of personal vignette games established in this chapter.

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44 Humble Grove, 2018, https://humblegrove.itch.io/friary-road.

45 See appendix 1.

46 Numinous Games, *That Dragon, Cancer*, Numinous Games, Microsoft Windows, 2016.

47 Gareth R. Schott "That Dragon, Cancer: Contemplating life and death in a medium that has frequently trivialized both.", in *DiGRA 2017*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 1-10. Digital Games Research Association, 2017.

2.2 Avant-garde play and game poetics

To meaningfully engage with personal vignette games as playful objects, it is essential to establish the language and theory available to do so. In this section, I argue that avant-garde game design and the study of poetics offers a language for the personal vignette game. As a form shaped intrinsically by its personal, social and creative contexts—built for imagery and improvisation—I make the case here for exploring the personal vignette game through comparison to the existing language of media studies around the expressive, the avant-garde, and the countercultural.

Personal vignette games, as explored in section 2.1 of this chapter, can be seen as arising from a variety of artistic and social influences, with a complex relationship to games as entertainment and no clear-cut method of identifying whether a game sits within the genre. As such, it is perhaps not surprising that the games display a wide variety of unconventional design approaches when it comes to their aesthetic style, narrative substance and player interactions. It is these unconventional approaches which I tie to the world of avant-garde games, there finding a useful shared language to draw upon.

In his 2005 discussion of games as a new lively art, Jenkins refers to the increasing use of games as metaphors or design elements in avant-garde installations.[48] Although the writing is preoccupied with the overlap between videogames and Selde's conception of "lively arts",[49] many of its arguments are for games as an evolving medium to take more experimental risks with content and form. Jenkins argues that games taking such risks could escape the "banal, formulaic, and predictable" format found within the confines of commercial pressures, and games "[as] they have been". This brief nod to the place of games in the world of avant-garde media is a passing comment on playful media being used in new and novel ways, and points toward the kinds of games with which this thesis is concerned.

As such, I also argue that the social and creative contexts of the personal vignette game fit more appropriately into the avant-garde space, rather than in areas such as persuasive or serious games. Although their game design and scholarship may share similar languages when it comes to meaningful play or subversive design, the personal vignette game does not necessarily prioritise personal or social change. Serious games, built for appreciation or social purposes, may share some of the personal vignette game form, but are ultimately shaped by their ability to explicitly and clearly perform a lesson for a player. This is a radically different

48 Henry Jenkins, "Games, the New Lively Art", in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, ed. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein. (The MIT Press, 2005): 175–189.

49 The Seven Lively Arts (1924, revised 1957) explored popular art forms, which were considered disreputable at the time, as vital and innovative media.

approach to the way personal vignette games are shaped (see Chapters 4 and 5), for interpretation and personal meaning. Through the avant-garde lens, the personal vignette game approaches to author intent, poetic creation and form/meaning find common connection.

To establish the avant-garde/poetic game concepts that underpin the works of this thesis, section 2.2.1 explores the role and form of the avant-garde game, and the intersections between avant-garde games and personal vignettes. Section 2.2.2 goes on to establish how these experimental game mechanics and aesthetics can be considered as interpretive, poetic forms of play.

2.2.1 Personal vignettes as avant-garde games and counterculture

The *avant-garde*, as it applies to art, arose in the early 19th century. Commonly attributed to French socialist Henri de Saint-Simon, the term is used to describe art works that push at some established boundary—the limits or expectations of an artistic form, or of the analytical understanding of the art. An avant-garde work then is one that is inherently unconventional, experimental and disruptive. Though the term has been used to describe a number of influential art forms, it is still often used in the discussion of any radical art, which steps outside the expectations of a form. The avant-garde, then, can increasingly be found in the discussion of contemporary videogames, as established approaches and forms are challenged by new design and ideas. As the discussion around the narrative and playful possibilities of videogames evolves, and so too does the diversity of game creators, videogames today seem to offer a great deal of avant-garde potential.

Koenitz points to the "Walking Simulator" game genre as a contemporary avant-garde videogame narrative; a defiant rethinking of what is a player's role within a game.[50] This defiance of expected player role parallels the nebulous sense of character and unconventional player agencies that personal vignette games present. Schrank's seminal *Avant-garde Videogames: Playing with Technoculture* explores using alternative approaches to making and playing outside of mainstream simulationist experiences.[51] He points to games that utilise their form for radical, political or aesthetic statements which explore not necessarily what they can *do*, but what they *mean*, and how they say it—the interpretive, poetic personal vignette game is one such kind of game. In Ruberg's extensive work around queer narratives in games, the *queer games avant-garde* is a frequently used term, emphasising the boundary

50 Hartmut Koenitz, "Beyond "Walking Simulators"–Games as the Narrative Avant-Garde", extended abstract, in DiGRA 2017, 2017.

51 Brian Schrank and Jay David Bolter, *Avant-Garde Videogames: Playing with Technoculture* (MIT Press, 2014).

pushing qualities of queer games made outside the video game cultural mainstream.[52] Here, too, the personal vignette game can be found, created in communities which overlap very little with mainstream commercial game development.

Through the work of Koentiz, Schrank and Ruberg discussed above, an argument may also be made for personal vignette games not as the avant-garde, but as a form of counterculture. *Counterculture*, a culture or group existing in opposition to mainstream, and is rooted in postmodern movements and resistance to consumerism. As such, it is often used to refer to more everyday works than the "high art" implications of a*vant-garde.* McKay's analysis of DIY culture[53] (seen as an extension of counterculture) reflects the personal vignette game background well, making a clear argument for considering the games in similar terms:

> Like the 1960s version we tend to associate the word "counterculture" with, DiY Culture is a combination of inspiring action, narcissism, youthful arrogance, principle, ahistoricism, idealism, indulgence, creativity, plagiarism, as well as the rejection and embracing alike of technological innovation.

Within games studies, however, the term avant-garde is often found in reference to small works and DIY creations; although the personal vignette game fits neatly into the category of counterculture as well, as the more commonly used term within games studies, it is avant-garde that I refer to throughout this thesis.

Considering games through an avant-garde lens, then, allows for an examination of their deviations and transgressions without perceiving these as flaws, and without the baggage of considerations as to what is, and is not, a true game. As Schrank states in *Avant-garde Videogames*, "the avant-garde liquefies games. It breaks apart and diversifies what games are as well as can do."[54] From their complex, informal relationship with design, development and media consumption, the personal vignette game does not feel out of place alongside these wider discussions around avant-garde games; the personal vignette too challenges the expectations around form, content, narrative and interaction in videogames. The avant-garde lens makes allowances for what personal vignette games often eschew. The lack of linearity, clear rule-sets, consistent mechanics, end states or technical polish of many personal vignette games broadens the scope of what a game can be, and becomes a key feature in the discussion of what these games *mean*.

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

53 George McKay, *DiY Culture: Party and Protest in Nineties Britain*. (Verso, 1998: 2).

54 Bonnie Ruberg, The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games (Duke University Press, 2020).

The scholarship of avant-garde games provides a useful contextual landscape and language for parsing the unusual and often subversive form of many personal vignette games. Perhaps more importantly, the meaning-focused form of avant-garde games, alongside the closely linked ideas of *form* and *intent*, is reflected in the diverse and ambiguous shape of the personal vignette game. Through the fluidity of how avant-garde games present and appear, personal vignette games find a counterpart in form and function, encompassing their varying styles of play and performance. This becomes most apparent in Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis, where the intentions of creators are first and foremost in my considerations. Through viewing the personal vignette as an avant-garde game, the intent, shape and impact of the games is investigated contextually alongside what the game intends to be, and to mean, beyond the pure functionality of how and why it plays a certain way.

2.2.2 Poetics in personal play

Though they may present through a number of very different forms, I argue that the poetic qualities of personal vignette games are an essential part of their play. What holds the loosely defined vignette form together is not a particular, identifiable use of camera, level design or game mechanic, but a looser canon: one built around the prioritisation of imagery and evocative description. These *game poetics* are playful experiences shaped by game meter and metaphor, rhetoric and imagery, pauses and performance; the personal vignette game is an amalgamation of form, aesthetic, interaction and narrative that centre those poetic qualities.

The prioritisation of poetics over written narrative or winnable systems is most apparent when close reading personal vignette games, as in Chapter 4. It is through the lens of poetic play that I examine access to personal experiences in personal vignette games—a style of game that makes heavy use of the reciprocal relationship between the game's meaning and its form/interactions, often exploiting the hazy boundary between the two. Winthrop-Young has previously argued for this nuanced relation of meaning and form, where the relationship between narrative and media technology is reciprocal; narrative is, depends on, and interacts with the technology[55] Werning, although primarily discussing the narrative/interactive in terms of *persona*, similarly argues that personal games create a projection space for player's interpretations through a constellation of connected mechanics, narrative and rules.[56] By understanding the narrative as overlapping and meshing with the specific media technology, the binary distinction between the game and its narrative becomes blurred.

55 Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, "Magic Media Mountain", *Reading Matters: Narrative in the New Media Ecology*, 1997: 29.

56 Stefan Werning, "The Persona in Autobiographical Game-Making as a Playful Performance of the Self", Persona Studies 3, no. 1 (2017): 28–42.

Mechanics designed and built around the intended feel of the game—expressing the game's content thematically through its interactions—can offer players another level of understanding and provide contextual information about the play with which they engage. A player's perception of a meaningful game experience is shaped not just by the emotional response to the content it provides, but by the impact narrative mechanics and context have as a combined force.[57] Take, for example, Freeman and Butler's previously mentioned *How Do You Do It?.* To play, two dolls on the screen are controlled by rotating them and moving them together, using a keyboard [Figure 6]—but the direction of rotation is not consistent, the rule of the game changes seemingly arbitrarily. This occasional, untelegraphed switching of which direction the dolls rotate in may leave player feeling confused, but then the girl on the screen is *also* confused—fumbling with dolls and the concept of sex, under the player's uncoordinated control.[58] These interactions may not be logical rules that can be learned and mastered, but they reflect the content of the game without explicitly stating it.

Figure 6: The opening screen for the playable section of "How Do You Do It?", showing a child holding two naked dolls.

57 Malte Elson et al., "More Than Stories With Buttons: Narrative, Mechanics, and Context as Determinants of Player Experience in Digital Games", *Journal of Communication* 64, no. 3 (2014): 521–42.

58 Adam Saltsman, "Designer Notes Episode 10: Nina Freeman", 8 May 2015, in *Idle Thumbs*, MP3 audio, https://www.idlethumbs.net/designernotes/episodes/nina-freeman.

Figure 7: The only screen of the Patient Rituals vignette game "VII. Night Sky", showing a figure exhaling a plume of steam into an empty night sky.

Perhaps the most recognisable poetic of vignette games, though, is that of brevity; the very genre is named for its narrow focus, after all. Although vignette games do not inherently *arise* from limitations or constraint (as explored throughout this thesis), the shortness of the playtime, alongside the succinctness of the game as a system and its presentation of content are the cornerstones of the vignette game. A clear example of pushing the vignette to its most minimal form is André Blyth's thesis work *Patient Rituals.* The games are a series of poetic, narrative moments, each game depicting the recurring character in a single, almost static scene. Within these scenes, only one interaction mechanic is available, from putting a hand into a water fountain to raising and lowering an umbrella, or simply breathing out into the cold air [Figure 7]. Though their playtime is brief, the minimal, concise interactions and interfaces present deep and complex experiences.

These stripped down, minimalist moments of play are only one end of the broad range of approaches to personal vignette games, however. While Arielle Grimes' *What Now* [Figure 8] does take place solely in one room, it does not take a minimalist approach. The game is noisy, loud and bright; the game's glitches, shrinking field of view, and dissonant soundtrack all make it almost difficult to navigate. The game uses the escalation of this glitch aesthetic and the slow restriction of the game space purposefully, to portray the experiences of anxiety and the resulting sensory overload.[59] Mary Flanagan's *[domestic]* is an equally cluttered modification (or 'mod') of the 3D first person shooter *Unreal Tournament*, presented as an explorable collage of memories that allow the player a little more freedom of movement. Photographs and images of the authors past are displayed alongside provocative text around the environment,[60] sitting at odds with the expected form of a FPS mod.

59 Leigh Alexander, "How Four Keys Can Create a Spectrum of Feelings", *Offworld* (blog), 18 May 2015, https://boingboing.net/2015/05/18/how-four-keys-can-create-a-spe.html.

60 Cindy Poremba, "Play with Me: Exploring the Autobiographical through Digital Games", in *DiGRA 2007: Situated Play*, DiGRA, 2007.

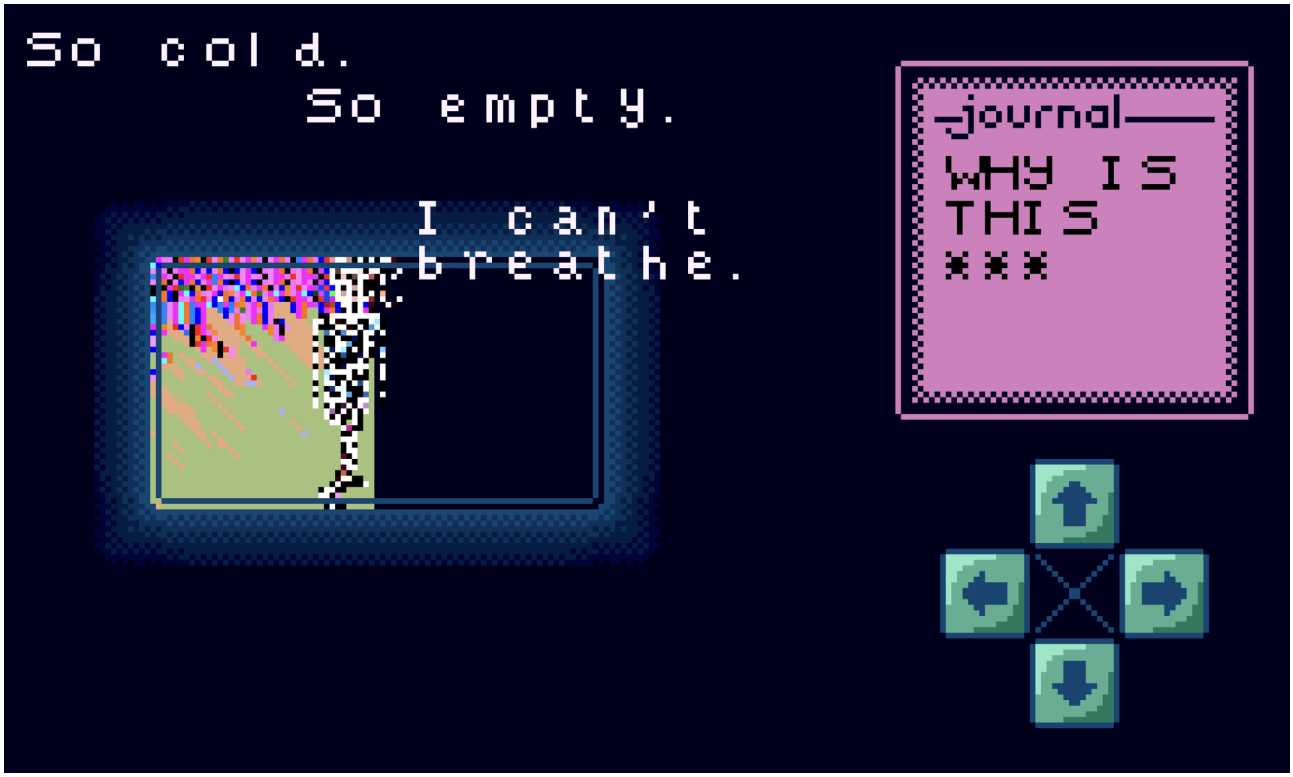

Figure 8: A screenshot of "What Now" by Arielle Grimes, showing a point at the beginning of the graphics breakdown where the room has shrunk and the figure has become static.

These poetic interactions within games, intentional gaps where a useful interaction could be, or even rules and interactions that appear misleading or 'broken', may also be used as a narrative tool (explored later in Chapters 4, 5 and 6). Many vignettes are left purposefully unpolished or unfinished,[61] making them difficult to play or impossible to complete—an active choice to use the presentation and play of the game itself as part of the narrative whole. If a situation is difficult, or leaves you without any obvious solutions, the absence of expected mechanics speaks volumes. The interactive narrative work *Depression Quest*[62] uses strictly gated choices in its branching texts, establishing a mechanic of multiple choices and then later simply forbidding you from some of your more helpful choices as they are outside the capabilities of the game character.[63] This seemingly unfair mechanic comes with no warning, and for a moment players may assume that a small section of the game has broken—they can clearly see an option that they can't click on. This unfair restriction provides a playful analogy, examining the difficulties of living trapped within the 'smallness' of depression.[64]

61 Werning, "The Persona in Autobiographical Game-Making".

62 Zoë Quinn, 2013, http://www.depressionquest.com/.

63 Ruud S Jacobs, Jeroen Jansz, and Teresa de la Hera CondePumpido, "The Key Features of Persuasive Games", *New Perspectives on the Social Aspects of Digital Gaming: Multiplayer 2*, 2017.

64 Nina White, "Gaming to Cope: How Developers Are Tackling Real Life", *The Telegraph*, 21 January 2016, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/gaming/what-to-play/personal-issues-inside-the-fascinating-world-of-interactive-biog/.

Purposefully implementing a frustrating, unexpected or unintuitive mechanic may seem against the spirit of a game, but a strong message conveyed may leave a player's expectations satisfied despite not feeling fun. Though a game's responses to the player within the scene may be unexpected, undefined or even actively unhelpful, this feeling of brokenness can be used to expand the play experience. A "broken" mechanic can create a spirit of the game for players to populate with their own ideas, or even gameplay.[65]

When play follows unconventional paths, failures, frustrations and confusion can be a valuable and appreciated method of play. As Nathalie Lawhead, in their discussion of personal games and surrealism, writes:

> You don't need to understand [a game]. You just need to feel it. That's why stuff like that is beautiful. It's the feelings of confusion, curiosity, appalment, sometimes awe from being stuck in something so alien… It's lovely how it changes themes, and spaces, on you without explanation. It doesn't need an excuse to do what it does. It just does it.[66]

While the argument can certainly be made that all games convey messages of some form through their mechanics and form, with the brevity and encapsulated experiences of personal vignette games, the available modes of interaction contribute more significantly to the meaning of the game as a whole. As Grace concludes in their efforts to formalise the language of game poetics—reminiscent of Schrank's own stance on avant-garde games—viewing games through a poetic lens "moves from explaining how things will be done, to what is intentioned".[67] Within my own close readings in Chapter 4, and my reflection on practice in Chapter 6, the examination of game poetics allows for a nuanced investigation into what a game might intend for players. Through the poetic lens of play, there can be readings which make room not for what a player might do mechanically, but for what the game might intend them to linger over, to connect with through their own bodily responses, to mimic, to interpret, or to understand.

2.3 Playing a personal vignette game

With the contextual expectations of personal vignette games established, the question of how to engage with the games as both games and as lived experiences remains. The personal

65 Douglas Wilson, "Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally OK Now", *Game Studies*, 2011.

66 Nathalie Lawhead, "Altgames Workshop: A Discussion of Surrealism and Personal Stories in Games" n.d., in *candybox* (blog), http://www.nathalielawhead.com/candybox/altgames-workshop-a-discussion-of-surrealism-and-personal-stories-in-games.

67 Lindsay D Grace, "The Poetics of Game Design, Rhetoric and the Independent Game", in *DiGRA 2011: Think Design Play*, DiGRA, 2011.

vignette game as a form encompasses a wide range of design approaches, as explored through the previous sections of this chapter. While they each offer some insight into the life or personality of another, they do not all evoke the same responses, and they do not all have the same aims in mind.

As discussed in section 2.2, personal vignette games can and do stray outside of the boundaries of traditional game forms and play. In this space of experimental, avant-garde, poetic play, it can be difficult to discuss, with nuance and appropriate contexts, the ways personal vignette games relate personal experiences. To examine personal vignette games as playable objects within these contexts, then, this section discusses three potential lenses of (i) enjoyment/appreciation, (ii) empathy and (iii) agency. I investigate both their suitability for discussing the personal, insightful content of the games respectfully, and for the nuances they may add to the discussion of works within this thesis. As this thesis focuses most closely on personal vignette games as connected to their authors, rather than to their players, these lenses appear most prominently in discussions of creator expectations toward their audiences, primarily in Chapter 5. Less directly, however, they influence the way in which the games are approached for close reading in Chapter 4, as well as the discussion of personal vignette games as practice in Chapter 6.

2.3.1 Enjoyment and appreciation in personal games

The first lens of experiencing personal vignette games is that of *enjoyment*, a commonly pictured response related to playing games. While there are many ways that an audience can enjoy a game, however, enjoyment as understood in popular discourse around video games often lacks nuance. Enjoyment as a purely *joyful* response, for example, may overlook many moving, thought-provoking works as the motivations of the audience cannot be accurately described or depicted within its vocabulary. To accommodate the complex responses of *enjoying* a game that also was not always *fun* then, there has been an influx of research in recent years which explores videogames as *meaningful* entertainment experiences. These "meaningful" games are usually described as those cultivated as tools for humanitarian purposes,[68] using emotional impact to engage with real world problems or "make the world a better place".[69] This cultural shift towards games experiences aiming to offer enriching or insightful experiences can be seen in design movements such as that of *Emotioneering*[tm]*.* [70]

68 Games For Change, "Games For Change", accessed 16 May 2018, http://www.gamesforchange.org/.

69 BAFTA, "Game Beyond Entertainment: New Category for BAFTA's Games Awards 2018", 19 October 2017, https://www.bafta.org/media-centre/press-releases/new-category-announcement.

70 David Freeman, "Creating Emotion in Games: The Craft and Art of Emotioneering™", *Computers in Entertainment (CIE)* 2, no. 3 (2004): 15–15.

This term is applied by David Freeman to his 32 techniques aiming to provide a broader, deeper range of emotion in games (such as 'Tying Story to Gameplay and Mechanics', or 'Enhancing Emotional Depth Through Symbols').

Larger scale projects such as *Values at Play* have emerged too, offering teaching and assistance to those aiming to design games around affirmation of human values (such as tolerance, equity and justice).[71] Often, games that stray from the dominant cultural norms of games discourse—purposefully or not—are framed by industry, academic, education, and media conversations as being games only in juxtaposition with their *not-game* qualities. They become *serious* games,[72] *empathy* games,[73] *persuasive games,*[74] or *games beyond entertainment*; the latter seemingly referring to gameplay which contains 'serious' messages, empathy or emotional responses, or extend beyond "entertainment". Bafta introduced the games beyond entertainment award as "a transformational experience [...] to raise awareness through empathy and emotional impact, to engage with real world problems, or to make the world a better place".[75]

These various monikers around meaningful games, however, imply a functionality to their genres that is not consistently apparent within personal vignette games. While many of the personal vignette games I discuss in this thesis explore difficult or complicated lived experiences, just as many do not. Personal vignette games, as will become apparent throughout this thesis, are not inherently sad or serious games; *personal* narratives have many facets, and those that are silly, joyful or fun are as important as any other.

The pile of personal junk that makes up Tomsmizzle's *sok-stories* game *find the phone*[76] [Figure 9] is likely not aiming to change my outlook on life, but does tell me what kind of things the creator owns, and a little about a (presumably) frequent moment of their life. The game says something about the author, then, in a way that is personal, charming and silly, while offering little in the way of challenge or narrative. The quiet reflection on personal relationships that is

71 Jonathan Belman and Mary Flanagan, "Designing Games to Foster Empathy", *International Journal of Cognitive Technology* 15, no. 1 (2010): 11.

72 Damien Djaouti et al., "Origins of Serious Games", in *Serious Games and Edutainment Applications* (Springer, 2011), 25–43.

73 Liz Owens Boltz, Danah Henriksen, and Punya Mishra, "Rethinking Technology & Creativity in the 21st Century: Empathy through Gaming-Perspective Taking in a Complex World", *TechTrends* 59, no. 6 (2015): 3–8.

74 Ian Bogost, *Persuasive games: The expressive power of videogames*. Mit Press, 2010.

75 Phil Stuart, "The Power of Games Beyond Entertainment", 19 October 2017, https://www.bafta.org/games/features/power-of-games-beyond-entertainment.

76 Tomsmizzle, n.d., https://sok-stories.com/?LGUL.

at the core of the gentle conversation between grandma and child in *Lieve Oma*[77] [Figure 10] is not a separate experience beyond its entertainment value, or the fun of exploring the woods in which you converse; it is a part of the experience as a whole.

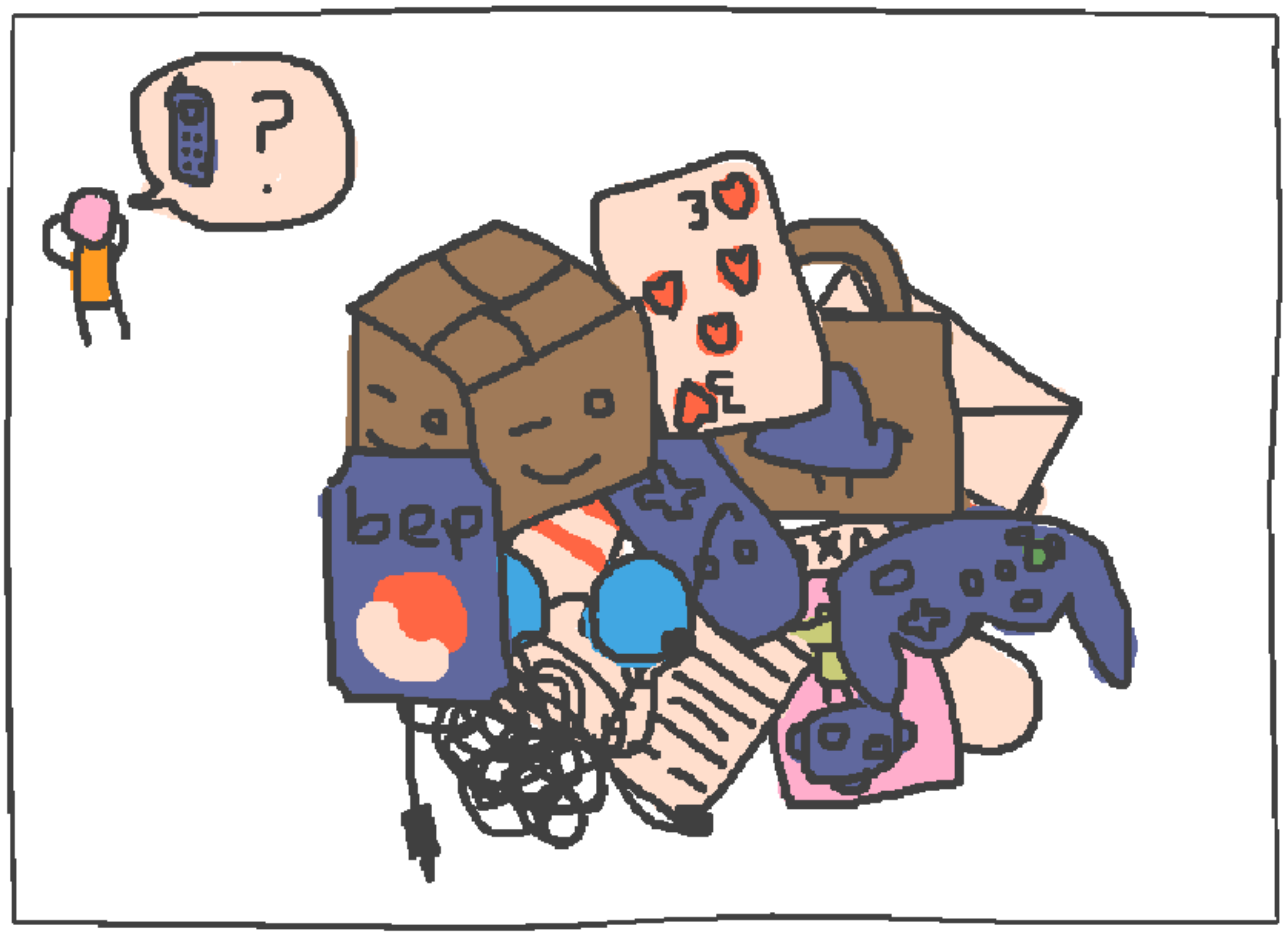

Figure 9: A screenshot of "find the phone" showing a jumbled pile of objects.

77 Florian Veltman, 2016, https://vltmn.itch.io/lieve-oma.

Figure 10: A screenshot of "lieve oma" showing grandparent and child talking as they walk through the woods.

While this thesis does not classify personal vignette games as strictly "meaningful entertainment", then, they are not strictly "enjoyable" ones in the traditional videogame sense either. For instance, a 30 second game of shuffling colourful discarded socks and crisp packets around like *find the phone* is unlikely to lead a player into a flow state.[78] It is also hard to argue for a single-interaction game such as those in *Patient Rituals* meeting competence or autonomy[79] needs in any meaningful way either.

Appreciation, then, is a particularly pertinent perspective for the study of personal vignette games, adding depth to the ways in which a complex, thoughtful, or "not fun" game might be enjoyed for its content. Throughout this thesis, I consider various responses of *appreciation* and insight, regardless of the presentation of their content. To do so, I borrow from the realm of traditional and new media studies, where alongside pleasure and positive affect, insight and meaningfulness are recognised as desirable outcomes for audiences seeking entertainment.[80]

As a measure to account for broader positive responses to emotional media, Mary Beth Oliver and Anne Bartsch propose that the experience of *appreciation* is needed alongside that of *enjoyment*. Appreciation accounts for audience responses concerned with feelings of being

78 Mihaly Czikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).

79 Richard M Ryan, C Scott Rigby, and Andrew Przybylski, "The Motivational Pull of Video Games: A Self-Determination Theory Approach", *Motivation and Emotion* 30, no. 4 (2006): 344–60.

80 Mary Beth Oliver, "Tender Affective States as Predictors of Entertainment Preference", *Journal of Communication* 58, no. 1 (2008): 40–61.

moved, perceiving deeper meanings, and motivations to explore the personal thoughts and feelings inspired by the media experience.[81] Early research into meaningful games has found that players' positive feelings of appreciation are most likely to be associated with story elements than with gameplay, and link strongly to experiences of insight.[82] Appreciation is not a singular stand-alone experience, though. Appreciation may encompass both happy and sad reactions to media, for example, and audiences are likely to experience both affective (feeling) and cognitive (understanding) facets to appreciation responses. Experiences that elicit both affective and cognitive components best capture the often complicated experience of appreciation, and the emotional states that accompany it.[83]

It is important to note, however, that enjoyment and appreciation should not be considered two opposite ends of a linear scale; entertainment may evoke both enjoyment and appreciation simultaneously, neither being mutually exclusive of the other. I, then, argue that personal vignette games offer experiences between enjoyment and appreciation, dependent on the tone, emotional landscape and contexts/intents of the author and audience. As creators have begun to seek out more humanistic, emotional experiences, audiences have responded positively to this new, insightful perspective of play. While there are many useful terms to apply from the larger discussions of *meaningful* videogames, it is the nebulous space between enjoyment and appreciation, motivated by personal/interpersonal insight, that this thesis makes the most use of.

2.3.2 Empathy and respectful engagement with lived experiences in games

The discussion of games outside of pure entertainment purposes is not a new concept, or even a particularly contested one any longer. A frequent lens through which games beyond "fun" are viewed, however, is that of *empathy*. As this thesis will discuss, personal vignette games are complex experiences of self-expression, intrinsically tangled up in the contexts of their authors; the insights they provide to their authors and audiences are equally complex concepts. As a concept, empathy (the vicarious experience of another's lived reality or feelings, as an attempt to understand or relate to the existence of another)[84] frequently occurs alongside discussions of embodiment, affect and intersubjectivity, to explore how people

81 Mary Beth Oliver and Anne Bartsch, "Appreciation as Audience Response: Exploring Entertainment Gratifications beyond Hedonism", *Human Communication Research* 36, no. 1 (2010): 53–81.

82 Mary Beth Oliver et al., "Video Games as Meaningful Entertainment Experiences", *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 5, no. 4 (2016): 390.

83 Mary Beth Oliver and Anne Bartsch, "Appreciation of Entertainment", *Journal of Media Psychology*, 2011.

84 Karsten Stueber, "Empathy", *International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, 2013.

might connect with others through play. Although it is a common feature of meaningful games discussions,[85] however, their potential for *empathy* responses is not an approach taken within this thesis.

The avoidance of discussing personal vignette games' potential for empathy is in part due to the use of empathy as an oversimplified catch-all term for emotional responses in games. Primarily, however, it is due to the reasonable concerns raised by those creating games of their own lived experiences (a theme discussed within this section, and recurring later in Chapter 5). Game designer Robert Yang, among others, has argued against this idea of games as experiences of empathy rather than of self-expression and solidarity:

> I've been making realistic 3D games about gay relationships for a while, and the vast majority of my players and fans happen to be straight people. This leads to a widely-held but incorrect assumption that I make my games for "straight people to understand what being gay is like" -- and some of the worst homophobes on YouTube even call my games "gay simulators" so they can react with disgust toward it. 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.[86]

Yang's discussion of his experiences with personal games and empathy reflects concerns raised by others—that those readings which centre the empathy of an audience without marginalised identities may reduce or appropriate the lived experiences the games reflect, decontextualising their authors.[87] This is particularly pertinent to the study of personal vignette games—works made often by a singular creator, for whom the game is a statement of identity. Creating a personal vignette game, by definition, creates a game *personal* to the author—most often a singular creator removed from the relative safety of a creative team. As discussed in depth in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, these personal attachments are often tightly linked with intimate explorations of the self, and a source of concern for creators sharing their worlds publicly. The consequences for creators are both personal and direct, then, when co-opting a personal vignette game into a tool for another's imagined empathy.

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85 Jonathan Belman and Mary Flanagan, "Designing Games to Foster Empathy", *International Journal of Cognitive Technology* 15, no. 1 (2010): 11.

86 Robert Yang, ""If you walk in someone else's shoes, then you've taken their shoes": empathy machines as appropriation machines", *Radiator Design Blog* (blog), 2017, http://www.blog.radiator.debacle.us/2017/04/if-you-walk-in-someone-elses-shoes-then.html.

87 Teddy Pozo, "Queer Games after Empathy: Feminism and Haptic Game Design Aesthetics from Consent to Cuteness to the Radically Soft", *Game Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018).

That is not to say that no positive social responses to personal vignette games are possible; *compassion*, for example, does not require this complete mirroring of feeling. Unlike the inward focused empathy (built on an internal interpretation or understanding), compassion is an outward focused response, a caring feeling on behalf of another.[88] In this vein, Ruberg argues for stepping away from the umbrella term of empathy, and the desire to turn games into teachable moments, suggesting instead more nuanced discussions of contextual emotional responses and their benefits:

> Out in the open, without the cover of empathy as a catchcall buzzword, sympathy, depth, and allyship become more visible and therefore more accessible for critique. Caring, compassion, sorrow, loss, and queer entanglement are powerful concepts that deserve to be spoken out loud, not lost in the rhetoric of empathy.[89]

These issues of intent and audience around personal games are important factors in respectful engagement with the games, their content and their creators. Personal vignette games, by their nature, allow us to see some personal aspect of their author through play—our emotional responses as players, then, are likely to encompass not simply the game, but the author too. The works are often self-indulgent or community focused first and foremost (Chapters 5 and 6)—and so the contexts of the author and of any imagined player are crucial when discussing the dynamics of the games as private, public and community objects.

2.3.3 Agency within playful shared experiences

Considering the games within the contexts of their authors alongside the play of the audience introduces some complexity to the concept of agency, and which takes precedence within the game. To address these challenges, this thesis approaches the concept of player agency through the lens of narrative agency, and the player's ability to connect meaningfully to the content of the game; it is through this lens that this thesis considers the presentation or protection of the self in personal games. It can be a difficult path to negotiate, to find that space within a personal narrative that asks the player to engage with the game's (and so the author's) performance respectfully—to navigate the contentious seas of insight, connection and appropriation. The outcome of this delicately balanced intent lies in a complex negotiation between author and player: an establishment of boundary and expectation, a balance of freedom and personal safety. This negotiation arguably manifests most significantly in the form of player agency.

88 Dorian Peters and Rafael Calvo, "Compassion vs. Empathy: Designing for Resilience", *Interactions* 21, no. 5 (2014): 48–53.

89 Bonnie Ruberg, "Empathy and Its Alternatives: Deconstructing the Rhetoric of "Empathy" in Video Games'" *Communication, Culture & Critique* 13, no. 1 (2020): 54–71.

Agency in games is often held to be intrinsically linked to the ability to take action within the constraints of the game's systems. Murray states that the satisfaction of seeing our decisions and choices having meaningful actions is a core enjoyment of our power in an interactive space,[90] Salen and Zimmerman also build their notion of agency around the players' ability to take actions and choices within the game system.[91] These widely read definitions, like many others, make note of the designer's need to anticipate the player's actions in the game space, and accommodate them accordingly. This concept of agency, as actions and our freedom to make them, is reflected in the commonly understood interpretation of agency in contemporary game design. Particularly within commercial game development, "true" agency can be perceived as giving the users relatively unrestricted power to act within or interact with the game space.

Agency in this form however is focused on player empowerment through freedom of choice and control within the game, and so is not a useful perspective for the sake of investigating games of personal narratives. It is only by stepping away from this consideration of the player as the central and unrestricted agent of the game world—whose desires the author must always be anticipating—that we can begin to understand experiences like those of personal vignette games. When playing within another's lived experiences, players take on the mantle of choice, responsibility and consequence for the actions they take within the game.[92] Without the lived contexts for these actions, however, to assume full control of the game (and so, the author's own experiences) may be considered an unreasonable transgression.

Wardrip-Fruin et al. propose a helpful redefinition of agency addressing some of these game/player conflicts, arguing that player agency should not be considered as a structural game property with the aim of "do anything", but instead as an interaction where the dramatic possibilities suggested by the world fit the player actions that the game supports.[93] Karen and Theresa Tanenbaum argue in the same vein that in game spaces where narrative understanding is prioritised, agency can better be understood as the player's commitment to meaning.[94] This view of agency prioritises communicative commitments between player and

90 Janet H Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace (*United Kingdom: Free Press, 1997).

91 Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (United Kingdom: MIT press, 2004).

92 Katherine Isbister, *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design* (Mit Press, 2016).

93 Noah Wardrip-Fruin, Michael Mateas, Steven Dow, and Serdar Sali. "Agency Reconsidered." *DiGRA conference.* 2009.

94 Karen Tanenbaum and Theresa Tanenbaum, "Commitment to Meaning: A Reframing of Agency in Games", UC Irvine: Digital Arts and Culture, 2009.

author, considering the game space as a stage for the improvised performance between author and player together.[95]

Using the action-focused definitions of agency, where a player's actions are limited or actively restricted by the game space, many may argue that a player lacks agency within the game; yet it is fully plausible that a player can remain fully engaged with the game and its fiction despite their minimal interaction. I am considering the game here to be more of a social convention then, in line with Goffman's frame analysis,[96] wherein a person's behaviour and experiences are organised by their mutual expectations of the situation they find themselves in. This approach is not a new one for game analysis, and the need for this approach shows in the recent shift of game studies interests from focusing on the formal properties of game texts, to instead allowing space to examine the social context and the people who are interacting both with and through the games.[97]

2.4 Discussion

This context chapter establishes the personal vignette game as a mode of self-expression built on principles of DIY, avant-garde creativity, building expressive experiences through game poetics. Within this thesis, I consider the personal vignette game primarily through these lenses. While personal vignette games may be contained and encapsulated experiences, this context chapter demonstrates that they are anything but simple. Additionally, this context section provides value to the personal vignette game and its related field of study in and of itself. However, there is currently little to be found presenting a contextual overview or literature review for personal vignette game practices, and useful areas of overlapping academic interest.

Vignette games, and personal vignette games in particular, have had little investigation in terms of their significance outside of playful objects. Though the contextual history and perspectives of personal vignette games presented in this chapter are necessarily incomplete, they reveal a complicated and multifaceted history, with a rich cultural context worth further exploration. In particular, I believe there is much more to be learned from the grassroots beginnings of the personal vignette games, and the impact these entry points have on creativity in game design. Current knowledge on DIY culture in general shows a strong focus

95 Karen Tanenbaum and Theresa Tanenbaum, "Agency as Commitment to Meaning: Communicative Competence in Games2, *Digital Creativity* 21, no. 1 (1 March 2010): 11–17.

96 Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience.* (Harvard University Press, 1974).

97 Sebastian Deterding, "The Game Frame: Systemizing a Goffmanian Approach to Video Game Theory", *DiGRA conference*, 2009.

on social creativity and bonds, as well as a notable shaping of form by the tools and technologies available—these influences may be assumed to have a direct impact on both the technical and expressive nature of the games created. The communities that have formed around the building and sharing of personal vignette games have shifted the demographic of both authors and audiences for game design, which can be seen reflected in the avant-garde sensibilities of the games themselves.

What is apparent from the available literature around these complicated concepts of expression and game play, however, is that the personal vignette utilises unconventional game design as a tool to create playful and meaningful communication of personal experience. Though the term and its boundaries are still being examined and established, the personal vignette game genre offers us potential for furthering understanding of how we see ourselves, place ourselves, and become ourselves through games. What is also apparent from the available literature, however, is that the personal vignette game itself remains understudied as a form of game design and self-representation. While there is much to draw on from studies of autobiography, avant-garde games and DIY media, the personal vignette game is yet to be examined thoroughly as its own phenomena, through its own lenses. The medium offers interesting and unique insight into game design as a personal and poetic practice, and into the importance and approachability of non-commercial, DIY game making.

The goal in my further investigations into personal vignette games is not to formalise the definition of, or design processes behind, personal vignette games. I instead aim to answer *how vignette games are used to explore personal experiences* in a more contextual and personal manner. In upcoming chapters I will draw upon these introduced ideas and languages of DIY, avant-garde, poetic, expressive, surreal and subversive games, to inform my discussions of personal vignette games as they are used to explore and identify aspects of the self, alone or with others. To do so, I consider the personal vignette game as objects portraying personal experience (Chapter 4), as conversation and identity for creators (Chapter 5), and as a reflective personal practice (Chapter 6).

3. Methodology

> Ultimately videogames do not need to be bridges, nor do they need to be operas: as we have seen throughout the course of our research for this project, they are endlessly fascinating and complex by themselves[98]

Having explored the critical and cultural terrain in which this research sits in Chapter 2, I will now lay out the methods used to perform this research, and the standpoints from which the research was approached. As discussed in Chapter 1, my research asks *how are vignette games used to explore personal experiences*, through the sub-questions of *how does the personal vignette game portray an author's personal experiences, what are the authors' connections to the personal vignette game,* and *what is the significance of personal creative process.* The structure of this thesis, then, places the personal vignette game in a dialogue with ideas of identity, craft and human connection, as it considers each sub-question separately, and as a part of the wider personal vignette game phenomenon. This dialogue considers personal vignette games not just as the videogames themselves, but as the culmination of the practices, communities and individual creators from which they arise.

To explore the interconnected aspects of personal vignette game dynamics, I undertook three studies—a close reading, a series of interviews, and a creative practice—which approach the research through a number of lenses. These studies focus respectively on the games themselves and how they present personal perspectives, then on their creators and how they experience their craft, and finally on the creative act itself that connects one to the other. In doing so, I focus on each of the established sub-questions in turn. *How does the personal vignette game portray an author's personal experiences* (Chapter 4), *what are the authors' connections to the personal vignette game* (Chapter 5), and *what is the significance of personal creative process* (Chapter 6) are each the main (although not exclusive) focus point of their respective studies The collective knowledge of these three studies allows for a more comprehensive answer of the main research question, as presented In Chapter 7.

Methodologically, then, this project takes a qualitative, mixed-method approach to parsing personal vignette game dynamics. This research draws primarily from media studies approaches of close reading and creative practice, although it also makes use of social science practices to provide in-depth interviews with game makers and the analysis thereof. In this way, I aim to better accommodate the complex relationships between the creator and player, game and practice, community and (perhaps most importantly) the self. I take a close

98 Marie Foulston and Kristian Volsing, *VIDEOGAMES: DESIGN/PLAY/DISRUPT* (V&A Publishing, 2018) :11.

viewpoint on the personal vignette game and its formal properties,[99] but I consider those formal properties in the personal and cultural contexts from which they arise. These contexts are provided by investigating creator perspectives on the social-cultural-political influences on how the works are made, and by whom,[100] as well as the personal production insights of creators/my own creative practice.[101]

This multifaceted approach also serves to challenge the common dichotomies through which many games are unfairly studied and designed; those which queer games scholar Bonnie Ruberg identifies as 'production/reception, control/agency, success/failure'.[102] The personal vignette game is abstract and evocative, and traditional video game measurements of success —largely industry driven perspectives on popularity, power or winning and losing—are not the most valuable approach to understanding them meaningfully. This thesis considers the personal vignette game, then, not as made of empirical or measurable attributes, but as a cumulation of personal importance, interpersonal connection, cultural influences and creative practices.

The three studies of my methodology all share the common belief that the personal vignette game is not simply the sum of its mechanical or procedural aspects; that the personal vignette game is a complex form of self-expression intrinsically linked to both its creator, and the contexts in which it was created. Building on the contextual research of Chapter 2, the studies aim to explore different aspects of personal vignette games as a personal and communal creative act of self expression. By engaging with the games as poetic texts, as social hobby and personal statement, and as an ongoing practice, I present a pluralistic overview of how vignette games are used to explore personal experiences. This research also takes notable influences from contemporary queer games studies[103] and informal game design research;[104] partially due to my own particular position as a non-binary creator of queer DIY games, and partially due to the nature of personal vignette games as explored in Chapter 2.

The research questions and studies I have undertaken have been intrinsically shaped by my own background as a maker of personal vignette games, and my own experiences of self as an embodied subject in play. Concerned as this thesis is with the *personal* vignette game, this

99 See Chapters 4 and 6.

100 See Chapter 5.

101 See Chapters 5 and 6.

102 Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, *Queer Game Studies* (U of Minnesota Press, 2017).

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

104 Brendan Keogh, "Who Else Makes Videogames? Considering Informal Development Practices", *Brendan Keogh Blog* (blog), 2017, https://brkeogh.com/2017/07/11/who-else-makes-videogames-considering-informal-development-practices/.

subjectivity has been actively pursued as a meaningful part of my investigations. This is most prominent in my own creative practice, but inescapably shows throughout the thesis as a whole—my readings are coloured by my world-views and notions of interpersonal connection, my interviews are partially guided by my own perspectives on DIY games. My own perspectives are all equally grounded in my experiences as a white, western creator. These perspectives are widened by the inclusion of games and creators of differing backgrounds in my studies, but this bias is still reflected in my connections to existing creative communities, the platforms through which I was able to find and play games, and the language in which I could play them.

I begin this overview of approaches in Section 3.1, exploring close reading and its application in regards to videogames. This section also outlines my particular use of the method in the investigation of player/author negotiations of self in play (Chapter 4). In 3.2, I go on to detail interviews with personal vignette game creators, and the thematic analysis approaches through which I interpret the shared experiences of the creators I spoke with (Chapter 5). Finally, in section 3.3, I detail creative practice as a method, and discuss its inclusion in this thesis. I also lay out the importance of the critical reflection, which contributes to the study alongside the practice I carried out (Chapter 6).

3.1 Close reading personal vignette games

The first approach taken in my research is close reading (Chapter 4), where I present a central reading of a personal vignette game compilation, Alex Camilleri's *Memoir en Code: Reissue*,[105] alongside short comparative readings of the games *Indelible,*[106] *and i made sure to hold your head sideways,*[107] and *Sacramento*.[108]

I chose these works because they both fit my working notion of vignette games, and have been explicitly referred to as personal, in some form or another, by their creators. As previously explored in Chapter 2.1, the boundaries of what constitutes a vignette game are fuzzy and hard to strictly define—these criteria then are loose, and a variety of approaches to personal vignette games appear across the games chosen for close reading (this is discussed in more depth in Chapter 4.1).

These chosen works also present a range of personal vignette game aesthetics, contents, intents, providing varied approaches to sharing personal experiences with players. In terms of

105 Camilleri, 2016, https://www.memoirencode.com/.

106 Melody Lee, 2015, https://melodily.itch.io/indelible.

107 Jenny Jiao Hsia, 2017, https://q_dork.itch.io/and-i-made-sure-to-hold-your-head-sideways.

108 dziff, 2016, https://dziff.itch.io/sacramento.

answering the research question, these readings of player positioning thus explore the ways in which personal vignette games express aspects of their author to others. I am particularly interested in the use of framing, aesthetics and interactions as used to position the player meaningfully within the author's experiences. It is this focus on the relationship between form/content/player that led to the use of close reading as a method of investigation.

The core of my close reading centres on *Memoir en Code: Reissue,* which was chosen largely due to its openly personal nature, and because of its compilation form: it is a vignette game composed of vignette games. The variety of vignettes presented within *Memoir en Code: Reissue* provide multiple approaches to presenting personal content through play. As such, the game offers a varied and nuanced close reading for multiple player positioning approaches, all within the same theme of content (Camilleri himself). Reading through my own framework of player positioning, I parse the games for their manifestations of a negotiated author/player presence, and the player's relationship to the game's personal content. I triangulate player positioning between the points of player as protagonist, player as protagonist-proxy, and player as witness (discussed in depth in Chapter 4), positions of play which are shaped by the presentation of the game space, and the actions which take place within it.

The readings I discuss in Chapter 4 examines the ways in which personal vignette games offer connections between players and the lives of the creators. This examination is primarily interested in the negotiations of insight, intimacy and narrative agency which provide players with meaningful interpretations of another's experience. My close readings focus on the representation of complex personhood, inner life and abstract ineffable personality, through examining their aesthetic and poetic presentation in play. To decipher the relationship between player, author and experience within personal vignette games, I consider the audiovisual aspects, the interactivity and the rhetoric therein. The readings are not, however, overly invested in a literal reading of the meaning within the games' written texts, insomuch as it is interested in how the text is presented visually and interactively. While there is much of an author's personality to discover through their prose, many personal vignette games are almost or entirely wordless; I am more interested then in the universal language they share through their presentation and play.

Close reading as a technique of interpretation is the act of paying close, careful, sustained attention to the parts of a text to reveal some deeper interpretation or meaning. The act of close reading asks the reader to examine—deliberately, actively and reflectively—the form, feeling or ethos of a work, through both the real-time experience of reading as well as a

removed and critical reflection.[109] Though the focus of each reading may differ, it is through paying attention to a text's components (words, phrases, symbols, metaphors, etc.) that it is possible to interpret what they might display of the text's internal logic.[110] Though (perhaps unsurprisingly) close reading is most firmly rooted in literature studies, with a reconsideration of what constitutes a "text", it has become a useful tool for a wide variety of contemporary media critics.

Expanding close reading as a method to encompass digital media, though, has required an expansion of what falls within the notion of a "text"; from a formalist perspective it is arguable that the addition of a computational mediation varies the form beyond "reading". There are new complications to be considered in the possibilities of branching narratives, and the inconsistencies of texts which may present in different orders or configurations depending on how the audience interacts with them. Additionally, digital media as texts may present their meanings through more than the literal words they contain; the new *page* is more complex, with meaning to be read in the sounds and movements and aesthetics of the screen.

However, under the reasonable understanding that some narrative context never manifests through being spoken from mouths or written on pages, digital media such as games can and do fit firmly in the territory of a readable text.[111] Early waves of close reading as applied to digital texts showed the possibilities of using the approach to examine the shifting, interactive achievements of electronic art and hypertext works.[112] *Texts* as understood for close reading purposes, then, have shifted from the traditional format (a linear path from beginning to ending) to more intricate webs of narrative—freely explorable nodes of interlinking content, or complex rhizomes of branching, splitting and twisting narrative.

The early evolution of the technique for readings of interactive, hypertext fiction transformed close reading approaches, making it more easily applicable to later works in videogames; though they may lack clear cut ludic mechanics,[113] hypertext works exhibit many elements of play.[114] Close reading becomes, then, the backbone of the numerous analytic works of

109 Annette Federico, *Engagements with Close Reading* (Routledge, 2015): 9-10.

110 Wilfred L Guerin, *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1992).

111 Jim Bizzocchi and Theresa Tanenbaum, "Well Read: Applying Close Reading Techniques to Gameplay Experiences", *Well Played 3.0: Video Games, Value and Meaning* 3 (2011).

112 Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, and Hans Rustad, *Analyzing Digital Fiction*, vol. 5 (Routledge, 2013).

113 Astrid Ensslin, *Literary Gaming* (MIT Press, 2014).

114 Interactivity, choice, and non-linear narrative, to name a few.

videogame form and meaning. Close readings of videogames can be found in numbers within *Well Played*, a journal on videogames, value and meaning[115] which offers close readings under a variety of lenses; from poetic uncertainty of form in *Kentucky Route Zero*[116], to defining Weird Games through *The Secret World*,[117] games are read well through their textual properties to uncover depths to their meaning and intentions.

This expansion of close reading as a method, though, is not without its additional difficulties when investigating game texts. Due to the difference in form between traditional and media texts, the nature of close reading videogames does involve some unavoidable practical hurdles, which are worth addressing here. The majority of the difficulties arise not from the game as a discursive form, but as a mechanical object with some level of indeterminacy, scope and difficulty:[118]

- *Indeterminacy*, as the reading has to account for many unpredictable behaviours, encountering game assets out of sequence (or not at all), procedural generation, or missed routes in branching narratives may have an impact on the reading.
- *Scope*, as the mere size of the game may make it difficult to adequately read as a complete text (whether that be in game geographical size, the play time to 'complete', or both).
- *Difficulty*, as a reading of a game text undertaken by an investigator unfamiliar with the mechanics or hardware of the game, lacking the reaction or dexterity required to play fluidly, may well focus the reading on a different set of details than a more 'skilled' reader.

Some of these difficulties, however, are mitigated naturally within my own studies by the vignette game as a form; scope and difficulty issues are both greatly reduced by the short form and the tendency for simple, minimal interactions. The lessened effects of scope and difficulty also allow more room for revisiting the games in their entirety. As there were no great barriers of skill or time to play the games chosen for close reading in Chapter 4, it was possible to play the games repeatedly, thus moderating the effect of indeterminacy on the readings I provide—a concern which was already lessened in many of the games by the limited amount of procedural, branching or optional content.

115 Drew Davidson, *Well Played 1.0*, 2009.

116 Alex Mitchell, "Defamiliarization and Poetic Interaction in Kentucky Route Zero", *Well Played* 3, no. 2 (2014): 161–78.

117 Tanya Krzywinska, "Conspiracy Hermeneutics: The Secret World as Weird Tale", *Well Played* 3, no. 2 (2014): 123–43.

118 Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, *Well Read*.

With these mitigations in place, I proceed with my close readings by playing and interpreting the games with a particular attention to the relationship between author, player and the experience portrayed within/through the games. I played each game 4 times through to the end; although the majority of the games are fairly linear, this allowed for taking minor deviations within each playthrough. I recorded my play each time, so I could return to my sessions at a later date when investigating particular aesthetic or mechanic details. The notes during the initial playthrough for each game focused on features (aesthetic, narrative, interactive, framing, focus, etc) which I found conveyed something personal of the author to me. These notes detailed the feature as it appeared in the game, my connection to the author or experience at that moment as I perceived it, and then a number of tags to detail what kind of feature it was.

After returning to my first notes for the games, viewed all together alongside the recordings of my play sessions, I was able to translate the experiences the captured into the player positions used throughout Chapter 4. Later play sessions used the player positions uncovered through the first stage of the close reading, using the same approach as outlined above.

Much like the rest of this thesis, the close reading I provide in Chapter 4, while methodical and in-depth, is not necessarily dispassionate. It is easy to treat close reading as an emotionless or even aggressive technique, stripping the text down to its bare parts. Van Looy and Bartens, in their own introduction to *Close Reading New Media,* offer that "there is a sense of hostility between the reader and the text", where the text is "never trusted at face value, but is torn to pieces and reconstituted by a reader who is always at the same time a demolisher and a constructor."[119] The reading is also, inevitably, not *the* meaning of the text, but *one* of the meanings, as interpreted through my own contexts and experiences of play. What I experience is not universal, nor objectively the truth of the games.

Though a full close reading offers less of how exactly the game was played, and offers no personal anecdotes to augment the interpretation of the game, the close reading I present in Chapter 4 does aim to emulate some of a more conversational approach.[120] In the 2015 compilation of essays *Videogames for Humans,*[121] a number of *Twine* games are presented to the reader, through text, as they are played by the authors. Part close reading, part written

119 Jan Van Looy and Jan Baetens, *Close Reading New Media: Analyzing Electronic Literature*, vol. 16 (Leuven University Press, 2003): 10.

120 Both in the sense of as a researcher describing the feeling of the games to another person, and in the sense of a conversation between myself and the game.

121 Merritt Kopas, *Videogames for Humans: Twine Authors in Conversation* (Instar Books, 2015).

Let's Play,[122] part personal essays, the presentation of these games through active reading and personal interpretation brings a sense of intimacy and meaning to games intended to be viewed not as tests of skill, but evocative experiences. Similarly, the reading I present is about the player's (my own) sense of self, as mediated by the games and their authors; I offer up my own perspectives on embodiment within the games using my proposed framework alongside my own cognitive and bodily experiences while playing.

3.2 Interviews and analysis of creator experiences

Though the experience of playing a personal vignette game may shift and change in the hands of each individual player, the personal content it represents is always inextricably tied to the game's creator. The formal properties of the game, too, are inextricably tied to the contexts under which it was made. My research question thus connects game to creator; to examine how vignette games are used to explore personal experiences, the personal contexts under which they are made must be established.

To that end, I held 16 semi-structured interviews with personal vignette game creators about their own experiences working within the medium. These interviews build on the themes of personal connections through vignette dynamics (Chapter 2) and complicated personal content/player relationships (Chapter 4). I identified suitable interview participants by two means: personal invites to creators whose work I knew, or whom I knew personally as a game creator myself, and an open call on Twitter. I then carried out a bottom-up, reflexive thematic analysis of the interviews, as codified by Braun and Clarke,[123] to identify and interpret themes.

Through this approach, I was able to highlight some of the shared experiences of the creators, and the ways in which personal vignette game dynamics manifested for them through creation and community. This happened through several iterative stages; after familiarisation with the interview contents, codes capturing both semantic content and latent concepts were developed. The interviews, codes and their interpretation contributed to the themes I identify and discuss in Chapter 5.

By presenting interviews with creators alongside scholarly interpretations of their work (such as some of the close readings in Chapter 4), I aim to shift the focus away from the games as untethered objects, and to instead present the personal vignette game form as it is shaped and

122 Live streamed or pre-recorded video footage of someone playing a videogame for others to watch, often with commentary from the player.

123 Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. "Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis". Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health 11, no. 4 (2019): 589-597.

experienced by those making them. These interviews thus covered a range of perspectives on the personal vignette game craft, and identified shared experiences of creation to obtain rich exploratory insight into experiences of personal games practice.[124] Following in the footsteps of works such as Ruberg's *The Queer Games Avant-Garde,*[125] Ellison's *Embed With Games,*[126] and Nicklin's *A Psychogeography of Games*,[127] the discussions I carried out place the creators themselves at the forefront of the discussion around their practices and work. It seems remiss to investigate a form of creative expression so intrinsically tied to sharing personal human experiences without allowing those within it to tell their own stories.

Unlike the works named above, however, the interviews themselves are not provided as a significant part of the text in Chapter 5. With this study, I am interested in highlighting connections between shared experiences of personal vignette game creation, rather than presenting and reflecting in depth on individual practices. I do provide a number of illustrative quotes pulled from the interviews, however—both to give examples of the discussions taking place, and to ensure there is still space to read about the creator's experiences in their own words, alongside my own interpretations borne from the thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis is, broadly speaking, a method for identifying patterns of meaning (or themes) across a dataset, and has underpinned a wide range of qualitative research studies across a number of disciplines before its coinage as a term by Braun and Clarke.[128] The generation of that analysis may come from a number of different approaches: from the data up, as guided by existing theory, as guided by the experiences of the participants, or as focused on how topics are constructed.[129] It is not, then, a singular approach, but a family of methods.[130]

Braun and Clarke discuss reflexive thematic analysis specifically—the approach taken within this thesis—as an approach which "involves asking questions that are not just about very surface-level observations or simple descriptions of experience".[131] It centres researcher

124 The selection of these participants is discussed in detail in Chapter 5.1.

125 Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*.

126 Cara Ellison, *Embed with Games* (Birlinn Ltd and Polygon, 2015).

127 Hannah Nicklin, *A Psychogeography of Games*, 2015.

128 Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (1 January 2006): 77–101.

129 Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners* (sage, 2013): 174-178.

130 Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Can I Use TA? Should I Use TA? Should I Not Use TA? Comparing Reflexive Thematic Analysis and Other Pattern-based Qualitative Analytic Approaches", *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* 21, no. 1 (2021): 37–47.

reflexivity, working within qualitative paradigms, and carries the benefit of not being overly constrained by inbuilt theoretical assumptions.[132]

That is not to say that theory plays no part in reflexive thematic analysis, as any researcher will bring their own theoretical assumptions to the table. In the same vein, reflective thematic analysis is not an unbiased or neutral approach—it is an active process of interpretation. The analysis I present in Chapter 6 is coloured by my own perspective as a DIY practitioner, as a queer creator, and as a personal vignette game creator myself; none of these influences are inherently bad, simply present and acknowledged in my analysis. As an approach, it is flexible and ongoing, a development and refinement of understanding and contexts, with an emphasis on latent coding which has the potential to "explore the implicit and underlying meaning and facilitates a focus on structures and power".[133]

The approach I take with this study draws on established principles of inclusion and contextualisation from feminist and disability scholarship—it has been undertaken both *with* and *for* personal vignette creators, to place the games within their personal contexts. The creators' own interests, desires and wishes, then, have shaped the form of this study as much as my own parameters; from the branching paths the interviews followed, to what has and has not been quoted and discussed in Chapter 5, discussions were guided by myself and my participants equally.

Regardless of the creators' acclaim in wider game design circles, their history with the movement, or my own personal connections with them, all the interviews aimed to avoid tokenising or appropriating their experiences as creators. This is most apparent in the semi-structured nature of the interviews, which allowed creators to lead their own discussions around their works; however the interviews as a whole are structured to examine all the games as equally interesting and relevant, regardless of length, complexity, content, or creator.

Many of the creators interviewed make works which are very explicitly about their own queerness, disability, race—the personal vignette movement owes much of its existence to marginalised creators, creating games from perspectives and practices that Ruberg's own

131 Virginia Braun, Victoria Clarke, and Nikki Hayfield, ""A Starting Point for Your Journey, Not a Map": Nikki Hayfield in Conversation with Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke about Thematic Analysis", *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 2019: 1–22.

132 Kristina Lainson, Virginia Braun, and Victoria Clarke, 'Being Both Narrative Practitioner and Academic Researcher: A Reflection on What Thematic Analysis Has to Offer Narratively Informed Research', *International Journal of Narrative Therapy & Community Work*, no. 4 (2019): 86

133 Lainson, Braun, and Clarke.

work highlights as "overlooked, overwritten, or appropriated".[134] It is perhaps notable then that all participants waived the default stance of anonymity for these interviews, choosing instead to be named alongside their quotes and any discussions of their work. The ability to waive the standard anonymity was included in the full ethics submission for these interviews, as many of the games are published publicly and creators may reasonably wish to have their public games acknowledged as their work. However, some sections of the interviews were marked as not for direct quotation or discussion in the analysis by request; while these sections produced codes and contributed to the final themes, they were excluded from the pool of illustrative quotes, and the games or experiences they relate to are not mentioned within my analysis.

As the interviews I held took place over a relatively short period of time (the spring of 2019), they present a snapshot of a creative landscape which—like many primarily digital forms of creativity—changes frequently and evolves rapidly. Some of the game making tools mentioned here are no longer as simple as they were praised for at the time, and new communities have emerged for the making/sharing of personal vignettes, just as some of those highlighted by the interviews have since closed their doors. Regardless of the shifts in the scene during the completion of this thesis, however, the thematic analysis I present in Chapter 5 provides common shared themes underpinning a distinct vignette game ethos: a form of game creation that the creators described as design *through* positive restriction, *as* a playful creativity and *for* self expression. Together, they highlight a shared, if conflicted, ethos of vignette games not as simply *videogames*, but as a practice, a statement, and a community too.

3.3. Creative practice and critical reflection

My first two studies examine the dynamics of personal vignette games through their form as created objects (Chapter 4) and the creator's experiences of making and sharing (Chapter 5). As my research question is *how are vignette games used to explore personal experiences*, though, there remains a gap of understanding; between the maker and the finished object there is the act of making which connects them.

To connect the ideas found within the examination of object and creator, then, I take a final perspective on the form by examining the *creation* of the objects via practice itself (Chapter 6), utilising a practice-based research approach. This practice involved creating 3 publicly released personal vignette games of my own, under a variety of self-imposed constraints akin to those described by the creators interviewed in Chapter 5. I present an overview of these

134 Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*: 23.

works in Chapter 6, alongside my reflections on the dynamics at play during the process of creating personal vignette games.

The three games I created were made as naturally[135] as it was possible for me to do so under the constraints of my studies. The games were made over several months, at times where doing so was appealing to me outside of the need to create for purely academic timekeeping purposes. I used workspaces which had been mentioned by creators in Chapter 5, namely *sok-worlds*, *Flickgame* and the *Flatgame* template. The games were not created to a specific timescale, technical standard, or even required to be fully functional. Instead, the practice focused on experimentation, personal exploration, and the presentation of self, as importances of the medium highlighted in previous studies. Once finished, the games I made were uploaded to a custom made low-tech website as the micro-exhibition *rough edges*, and shared with the general public through my personal social media accounts.

The critical reflection on the works created for this study are shaped by three factors: the insights of the studies presented in the two previous chapters; existing literature on DIY practices, informal game design, and self-representation; and my own theory arising from the practice, documentation and personal reflections found within this study. The creation and publication of my 3 games—with other games partially or fully created, but not publicly released—allowed me to access embodied knowledge within the process of making, to emphasise the creative conflicts and uncertainties within DIY game design, and to approach the transgressive space of personal vignette game creation with personal and contextual awareness.

The study I detail and reflect upon in Chapter 6 is practice as a response to lived experience, both personal and ineffable. The collection of games are simultaneously an artefact for play, a personal meaningful practice, and a critical discourse on game form and presentation. The making of the games itself provides insight into the theories of vignette dynamics and the self arising from the previous works (Chapters 5 and 6). The reflection of the practice allowed these theories to expand and to connect to one another through the context of creation.

As with the previous studies examined in this thesis, my creative practice is less concerned with the concrete, quantifiable technicalities of game-making (as such, no code or evaluations of play are provided), and instead focuses on the affective and personal aspects of practice. The chapter presents a critical reflection on the practice of making and sharing of my games,

135 “Naturally” both in terms of my own creativity, and in terms of a reasonably normal practice of creating personal vignette games (based on observation from creators in Chapter 5 and my own past experiences making similar games).

alongside screenshots and documents from various points in the creative process. The aim of this study is to examine how self-expression manifests throughout the creation of personal vignette games. To do so, I examine the actual *act* of making personal vignette games, to dig further into the creativity behind the form, and how practice shapes the games and their content. The use of creative practice and critical reflection for this study also provides a more nuanced understanding of the creator as a presence within personal vignette games, and of the connection between the games, the author, and their sense of self.

There are a number of approaches to research incorporating or led by practice; the act of creating or uncovering knowledge by engaging critically with the act of doing or making, enmeshed with relevant ideas or theory. As Estelle Barrett describes research practice, in the introduction to *Practice as Research*, this approach to research is "the production of knowledge or philosophy in action"; that is, it is in *doing* or *carrying out* in practice that we *create* new knowledge, building a better understanding of the field. Haseman's *A Manifesto For Performative Research*[136] goes as far as to suggest that "performative" research is better considered as an altogether new, transgressive third category of research, representing knowledge as a symbolic performance of meaningful action. The expression or practice is, within the context of the research, the research itself. Particularly for research such as my own, concerned with the creative potential of the personal vignette as contextualised by its practice (among other aspects), making as a method of research gives an insight into the tacit knowledge held within the practice itself.

Practice as an act, however, is a complicated space—things do not always go as expected, and there is an inherent amount of unpredictability or mess in making or doing. It is not enough then simply to make and to hope. In Melissa Trimingham's *Methodology for Practice as Research*, these problems (the seeming chaos of the creative process) are well considered; while the *process* is acknowledged as possessing many disorderly features, the *planning* should be rigorous enough to incorporate this often beneficial mess into the researcher's methodology before practice begins.[137] Schön's concept of the *reflective practitioner*[138] is particularly pertinent here; those who think critically and carefully on their work throughout the process of carrying it out are likely to learn more profoundly about the problem they are

136 Brad Haseman, "A Manifesto for Performative Research", Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy 118, no. 1 (2006): 98–106.

137 Melissa Trimingham, "A Methodology for Practice as Research", *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 22, no. 1 (2002): 54–60.

138 Donald A Schon and Vincent DeSanctis, "The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action", 1986.

solving, and the process they are using to do so. He highlights design as an example of reflective work, in contrast to analytic or critical work, as:

> Almost always, designers' moves have consequences other than those intended for them. Designers juggle variables, reconcile conflicting values, and manoeuvre around constraints – a process in which, although some design products may be superior to others, there are no unique right answers. (p. 42)

It may be argued though that creativity, no matter how rigorously pursued, does not inherently contribute to knowledge; that an artefact is not, merely by its existence, an insight. Some other method of knowing must be applied before practice uncovers meaning and something can be known by it. Many proponents of differing creative practice models stress the need for some kind of audit to the process: the fourth stage of Shneiderman's genex framework, *Donate*, for example is built around the premise that "creative work is not complete until it is disseminated", and the results of this introspection contributed to libraries;[139] Trimingham warns against the conflation of artistic insight and research insight as one and the same, reminding us that any practice which wishes to underpin meaningful research must be subject to analysis, commentary, critical reflection.

Practice-led research then is not simply the act of making; crucially, it must be underpinned by the dialogue between theory and practice (or exegesis and practice). Practice as research as a methodological strategy sees the theory tested by the practice, just as the practice equally informs the theory. While its personally situated, emergent approaches may put it at odds with what is often expected of traditional scholarly research, it is in these unique qualities that its strength as a mode of research lies. As a tool for investigating the act of *making* personal vignette games, I utilised my creative practice and the reflection that followed to connect the act of making to the nature of the games I made, and to explore how both the act and the games themselves became or revealed reflections of myself.

139 Ben Shneiderman, "Creating Creativity: User Interfaces for Supporting Innovation", *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI)* 7, no. 1 (2000): 114–38.

4. Player positioning and access to personal experiences

The more you play the more you know me[140]

With the exploration of personal narratives through games come theoretical problems of navigating the tensions between the game (as a personal statement of the creator) and the player (playing within their own desires and contexts). Arguably one of the greatest challenges of personal vignette games is presenting a game which holds personal meaning for the author to players in way they can understand meaningfully through their own contexts.

In relation to my research question, then, my exploration of the connection between author and player as it manifests through play becomes an additional avenue of the ways in which personal vignette game creators use the medium to speak about themselves to others. As such, I ask here how game creators relate their own story through a medium which relies primarily on another (the player) to execute, addressing the sub-question of my research "*how does the personal vignette game portray an author's personal experiences*". Where the personal vignette game relays aspects of its author to an audience, it must do so in conversation with the player, else risk the personal meaning of the game being subsumed by the player's experiences. In this way, I touch also on the sub-question of "w*hat are the authors' connections to the personal vignette game",* by exploring the varying degrees of intimacy between author and player.

This chapter addresses this potential conflict of author/player interpretation and intent within personal vignette games, and proposes that personal vignette games are negotiating these conflicts through what I refer to as player positioning. The player positioning as I discuss it here is the player's perspective on play, as it occurs through collaboration between the player and author. The player positioning facilitates access and understanding with regards to the author's personal content, as the player makes connections with the narrative, aesthetics, interactions and contexts provided to them within the game space. I propose three non-exclusive player positions used to frame access to the author's personal experiences for the player:

- player as *protagonist*, experiencing the game space under the author's influences, but through the player's own actions and contexts;

140 Camilleri, 2016, https://www.memoirencode.com/.

- player as *protagonist-proxy*, behaving as a stand-in for the author, acting with their direction and contexts; or
- player as *witness* to the experience, given access to the author's thoughts, actions or memories as a bystander.

I argue that player positioning (and repositioning) bridges tensions between player and author as separate entities within the game space, and that this author-player shared identity makes room for players in experiences they may otherwise struggle to understand meaningfully. I explore the ways in which player positioning arises from the author provided content as it is interpreted through player actions and contexts. I examine how differing levels of player control or aesthetic/narrative abstraction create barriers or intimacy, distance or detail between players, the author, and the experiences of both parties. Through these discussions, I show how player positioning may manifest through combinations of aspects such as the possible mechanical interactions within the game, the narrative contexts and details provided to players for their actions, or the visual representations of the player character or world through the game.

Through the close readings I present in this chapter, primarily of the personal vignette compilation game *Memoir En Code: Reissue* (hereafter "*MEC:R*") by Alex Camilleri,[141] I explore how these positions shift fluidly to allow new perspectives on personal experiences. In order to establish player positioning as a framework applicable across the personal vignette game landscape, I also provide a number of short readings alongside that of *MEC:R.* These additional games have been chosen to highlight the breadth of the personal vignette game as a form, and the rationale behind their selection is established in section 4.2. Though primarily focused on player positioning, the readings presented in this chapter also explore the use of the brief and poetic vignette form to establish and highlight play through unfamiliar perspectives

I begin in section 4.1 by exploring the concept of persona in personal games. I differentiate identity in personal vignette games from ideas of character/avatar (4.1.1), then establish the boundaries of what I consider player position throughout this study (4.1.2). I then go on in section 4.2 to outline the rationale of the games included within this close reading, and the reasoning behind their selection. In 4.3 I present the close readings of *Memoir en Code: Reissue* and other games to examine the player positioned as protagonist (4.3.1), protagonist proxy (4.3.2) and witness (4.3.3), as well as the mixed presentation of multiple positions (4.3.4). Finally, in section 4.4, I conclude that the abstract and unspecified player presence within the game, as facilitated through the player positions mentioned above, allows for meaningful

141 Camilleri.

understanding of another's personal experiences through play. Though primarily focused on player positioning, the readings presented in this chapter also explore the use of the brief and poetic vignette form to establish and highlight play through unfamiliar perspectives.

Viewed through the protagonist, protagonist-proxy and witness lens, then, this chapter investigates my research question from the perspective of shared personal experiences in play. I use this reading to illustrate how different player positions alter the player-author identity within the game—allowing authors to frame their experiences appropriately through the player's own affective/cognitive responses and contexts. I argue that players may understand and interpret something of the author's personal experiences through a shifting identity, established and re-established in relation to the author. Player positioning, then, arises from the negotiation of narrative agency and contextual perspectives by the author-player, without being clearly defined in either one's favour. It is not a designed phenomena, but a shifting connection between author and player. For personal vignette games, whose players occupy a space between telling their own story and being told the story of another, positioning becomes a useful tool for examining the specific ways in which personal stories are being related meaningfully to others.

4.1 Persona and position in personal games

Within the personal vignette game, the question of who the player acts as within the game becomes a complex one—though the game presents experiences and narratives personal to the author, they are accessed through the player's own actions and interpretations. This shared input into the author's personal experiences as expressed through their games presents difficulties in establishing stable, clear identities for the player within the game space. Where concepts of playing as a character or avatar collide with the idea of personal content and autobiography, then, more nuanced approaches to the player persona and author presence within the game are required.

4.1.1 Identity in personal games

Conventionally, playing roleplaying or narrative focused games involves an avatar (a self-representation or proxy of the player) or a character (a fully or partially realised separate entity, controlled by the character) with or as whom players might identify.[142] These games most often see players assume a role based on their own identity, or that of a fictional character. Players may then use what they know about their in-game avatar or character to

142 Adrienne Shaw, ""He Could Be a Bunny Rabbit for All I Care": Exploring Identification in Digital Games", in *DiGRA 2011: Think Design Play,* 2011.

influence their behaviour, or help them to make sense of their actions. How I see the game world through the camera may help me locate where I am, for example, and to ascertain my physical and emotional distance from the actions that take place therein.

Within roleplaying games that use an in-game avatar, I may take guidance for my actions or my in-game personality from the physical traits I have been assigned or chosen.[143] The screen or camera which follows/inhabits a game character may also provide information about how I exist within the game; functioning as a perceptive organ of what Crick describes as a ‘‘game body”, confirming a corporeal presence within the game to the player.[144] Differing viewpoints, such as first-person and third-person game cameras, may imply and impact my ‘‘game body’’. The way I gaze upon myself or the world through my eyes or the camera may indicate how I am placed within the physicality of the game world, contributing to the immediacy of my connection to the character.

Where an in-game identity is neither crafted for nor evolved from the player, however, neither character nor avatar is applicable as a basis for player persona. In a personal vignette game, I am aware that I am not playing as myself, but I also lack the full context to play as the person acknowledged to be core to the personal aspects of the work. The player experiences a conflict of identity because they cannot claim to be the subject of the experiences the game portrays (its author). In her exploration of autobiography as a narrative of transformation, Carolyn Barros neatly sums up a core conceit of autobiography, arguing that “the something happened of autobiography always has reference to a *me*”.[145] In personal works, as in autobiography, players attempt to make connections between the ‘something happened’ and the ‘me’ to whom it happened. In his work *Phenomenology of perception*,[146] Merleau-Ponty argues that our continuous sensorial perception of the world, both situated and subjective, provides us with our meaningful knowledge of it. An ‘objective view’ of a given reality, he suggests, could be obtained only by combining the views from different perspectives into a meaningful composite of depth and dimensions. My understanding of the author as an experience, then, can be seen as a collage of my various perspectives on the *something that has happened*, and the *me* to whom the *something* relates.[147]

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143 Nick Yee and Jeremy Bailenson, “The Proteus Effect: The Effect of Transformed Self-Representation on Behavior”, *Human Communication Research* 33, no. 3 (2007): 271–90."

144 Timothy Crick, “The Game Body: Toward a Phenomenology of Contemporary Video Gaming”, *Games and Culture* 6, no. 3 (2011): 259–69.

145 Carolyn A Barros, *Autobiography: Narrative of Transformation* (University of Michigan Press, 1998): 6. Emphasis in original.

146 Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Colin Smith, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Routledge London, 1962).

147 Although the truly “objective” possibilities of any autobiography are debatable.

In the *something has happened* of personal vignette games, players find themselves somewhere between mimetic embodiment (carrying out actions as the narrative centre of the game), and diegetic experience (uncovering the author's story through their play). Wood identifies the terms as useful for exploring how players experience the game through their role within it:

> Useful terms to distinguish between 'I' and 'Other' engagement are mimetic and diegetic player experiences, using them to classify how the story is experienced [...] When players are story protagonists they have a mimetic experience; and when they are not at the narrative centre but a story is uncovered as they play, it is a diegetic experience.[148]

Wood goes on to address the spaces many games provide between these two modes of play with the idea of players as *experience protagonists*, centred in the experience of the game but not its story. Wood's writing on this role, particularly around games making use of poetic methods and Jenkin's notion of evoked narratives,[149] describe balancing game narrative and player agency. Through combining mimetic and diegetic play, as well as encouraging self-directed engagement, Wood argues players are steering not the story of the game, but the experience of playing it. This notion of players as *experience* rather than *story* protagonists is a useful one for discussing the play of personal vignette games, and the ways in which players are positioned within them. The player is not the *me* to whom *something has happened*, and as such they cannot steer the author's narratives as the subject of its autobiography. What the player *can* steer and embody, from a number of perspectives, is their specific experiences with the content provided by the author through the game.

Unlike reading an autobiography, then, playing a personal game also involves *something happening* to or around the player as they engage with the work. In considering the player's understanding of the author as the meaningful act of play, I concern myself primarily with the player's cognitive and somatic embodiment of the game as an experience or perspective of the author (that is, the game's creator and the subject of its autobiography). The 'player position' then, is the perspective from which players understand the game, and it becomes the player's perspective(s) of the author's experiences. The way the player perceives the *something happened/is happening* is both situated outside of the game while the player is bodily interacting with it, and within the game through the audio/visual contexts and views that the

148 Hannah Wood, "Dynamic Syuzhets: Writing and Design Methods for Playable Stories", in *International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling*, 2017: 24-37.

149 Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture", *Computer* 44, no. 3 (2004): 118–30.

game world provides them. The ‘me’ of the autobiographical game becomes a shared, mutable construct unique to each instance of play.

4.1.2 Reading for player position

Player positioning is considered within this chapter as the perspective and contexts through which the player may interact with the game world, and form their own interpretations of its personal content. The player positioning arises from how the player is situated with regards to the personal content of the game; their position relative to the author, built from their contextual and sensory understanding of the scene. As I will demonstrate in my close readings below, forgoing casting the player as an author character allows personal vignette game authors to create spaces to share their lived experiences without simply handing them over to others. By presenting vignettes of experiences, with differing levels of context, control or focus, those experiences can be shared without the player controlling the author’s agency, or claiming the personal experiences as their own.

I consider the player-author persona collaborations that emerge from these unspecific identities in play through varying ratios between three points of reference: *protagonist*, *protagonist-proxy* and *witness* (see the introduction to this section). Traditional concepts of action based agency (as discussed in Chapter 2.3.2) may be mitigated through positioning, which renegotiates the terms of shared persona and narrative agency. In other words, the positioning allows the player to function and have purpose within the established boundaries and contexts of the experience.

In this chapter, I argue that the player positioning is not design for or tied to a character or an avatar, then—a particularly useful concept for personal vignette games, where the author's presence pervades the game as a whole. The player’s presence within the game scene may be a picture of the author, a cube under their control, an audio clip of footsteps that sounds as the camera moves. There may be no indication of a physical presence at all, nor any signposting of whether you are viewing the personal experience as the author or as another. I argue, though, that these ambiguities are not a hindrance to intimacy, access or understanding personal content in vignette games—in fact detaching the player from inhabiting an established and consistent character/avatar allows for more meaningful player positioning to emerge within the game.

Through an abstracted or unclear presence within a personal vignette game, players may have meaningful, intimate access to thoughts, feelings and memories, acting out their part from

wherever they may best be positioned to understand what is being shared with them. Addressing the protagonist, protagonist-proxy and witness positions, in turn, I will examine how *MEC:R* repositions players with each game track, to support affective and cognitive connection with the shared author/player persona. In the case of *MEC:R*, narratively speaking the voice of the game is consistently that of Camilleri himself. However, the access I as the player am provided is a kaleidoscope of viewpoints and controls, and my positioning is readjusted scene by scene. *MEC:R* plays with this notion of self throughout, asking the player to adapt to a changing, fluid player position as the game progresses. While *MEC:R* assures me that my play will reveal Camilleri to me, it does not tell me I will be him, and I am not encouraged to strive to do so as I play.

4.2 *Memoir En Code*, and others, as personal vignette games

Memoir En Code is a self-proclaimed autobiographical game by Alex Camilleri, who describes it as "the most personal game I've ever made".[150] The game comprises a series of individual scenes about Camilleri's life, which lead the player through a variety of his lived experiences: "from the struggle of keeping together a long-distance relationship to the exploration of childhood memories".[151] After the initial release in 2015, the game was republished as *Memoir En Code: Reissue* in 2016—this update included an extra scene, redeveloped graphics and audio, and a set of developer's notes on each game that aimed to provide "a new take on some recentlife[sic] events".[152] I have specifically chosen *MEC:R* for this analysis over the original release due to the author's choice to extend the re-issue into a more updated self-portrayal. The game is an autobiographical character study and a purposefully experimental work, exploring the limits of game creation as a life writing tool. From graphics made from photographs of the author's hair to sections of code written using personally significant dates, Camilleri's work utilises the game beyond the playable portions to craft the digital object as a whole into a personal record.

MEC:R was also chosen for this close reading primarily due to its unusual presentation; the game is composed of multiple short vignettes collected and presented together, akin to a music album. This "game album" approach offers various personal vignettes for close reading, all created within the same author contexts, but utilising different techniques of player

150 Alex Camilleri, Twitter, 21 September, 2016, https://twitter.com/alexkalopsia/status/778641053683486721.

151 Alex Camileri, "Memoir En Code Presskit", 2016, https://www.kalopsiagames.com/press/sheet.php?p=Memoir%20En%20Code%20Reissue.

152 Camilleri.

positioning, different poetic approaches, and different aesthetic styles. While *MEC:R* has no singular, formal narrative arc, then, it does prioritise an evocative sense of narrative in its framing, and players are encouraged to know Camilleri through their actions and involvement. The games within *MEC:R* are presented through nine individual vignette game "tracks". Each track is presented as a small 2D space of minimal, flat colour graphics and limited player interactions [Figure 11], with the exception of one purely text-based screen (in the game track *Silippo*). The tracks can be played in order or skipped/replayed if desired; each scene is designed around a specific, contextless memory or mood of the author. In its first moments, before play begins, *MEC:R* explicitly invites the player into Camilleri's life via the message "the more you play the more you know me", framing the game that follows as an intimate personal and private investigation.

Figure 11: One of the five interactions in game track "Oranje", where players open and close an umbrella as the weather changes to contradict their actions.

However, there are two ways in which *MEC:R* is unusual for a personal vignette game. The first is the extent to which the game is framed as an exploration of the author. The opening text on screen "The more you play the more you know me" assures the player that to play the game is to know Camilleri himself. The same text presents the invitation to players to return to the game multiple times, and re-examine their initial assumptions about its content. Most of the personal vignette games discussed within this thesis make all their content available to players from the beginning, whereas *MEC:R* provides additional information through author's notes only after multiple playthroughs have been achieved. The second is that the game has

been revisited and updated to to appear more “polished” for its inclusion on the game distribution platform Steam. It is not unique in this approach (prolific personal vignette creator Nina Freeman also releases well polished and tested games on Steam). But it is worth noting here as being outside the norm, in comparison to the majority of the DIY personal vignette games examined within this thesis.

To include personal vignette games more typical of the personal vignette game approach, and to investigate how player position presents across games of differing styles, a number of short additional readings are included in section 4.3. The games chosen to accompany *MEC:R* are as follows. *Indelible* by Melody Lee, is a series of three very short vignettes themed around an unexpected menstruation, chosen partially for its attempts to specifically portray a ‘personal’ experience that is ubiquitous for many others (portraying shared experiences personally familiar to those who menstruate themselves). *and i made sure to hold your head sideways* by Jenny Jiao Hsia (publishing under *q_dork*) is a Flatgame of some acclaim—an experiment with the usual form which nonetheless retains recognisable Flatgame sensibilities (see chapter 2.1.2)—and is included as an example of a very constrained vignette. *Sacramento*, by dziff, is a small landscape made up of drawings from the author’s sketchbooks, and is included here for its abstract approach and wordless presentation. All of the games selected for close reading in this study are united by their personal content and vignette form; their aesthetic, content, reason for creation, intended audience and—most crucially—player positioning, all present very differently in play. Each of the games explored within this chapter express the exploration of personal experiences through very different styles of vignettes.

4.3 Negotiated persona through player position

Through a reading of player positioning in *MEC:R* and other personal vignette games, I argue that the connections between author and player within the game can be interpreted by the player through three key positions (the relationship of the player to the author in relation to the scene and its context). These player positions—player as protagonist, protagonist proxy, and witness—begin to emerge as the player performs and perceives the personal content of the game through different modes of play, utilising different affective and cognitive understandings.

I explore the player position framework not only through the separate positions of the protagonist/proxy/witness, but through the spaces in which the positions merge, overlap or appear alongside each other concurrently. I further argue that this ambiguity and fluidity may

be beneficial to both the author and player, allowing abstract and nuanced concepts of the self to coexist in play.

4.3.1 Player as protagonist: bodily experience, task-orientated presence

Although the term "protagonist" generally refers to a character central to a narrative,[153] in the context of my argument on player positioning I consider the "player as protagonist" to mean that it is the player who is the focus of their own attention in the scene. Rather than the author having the player act as though they *are* the author as a character, the player is instead given their own control over the scene and asked to find meaning in their own actions and responses. Assuming a protagonist position presents an immediacy of the connection between the player and the game space—one where the player is given the opportunity to play directly in the space, inhabiting and acting within the scene primarily as themself. The idea of the player performing as the author may be stated or implied in the game's fiction or meta-text, but is not immediately apparent in a meaningful way through play. Where the player is presented a scene as a real-time event (a quick-time or reaction based game, for example), the requirement of piloting or inhabiting a character may be primarily an affective one, with little need to cognitively connect with the author. Throughout this close reading, I am referring to affective responses inline with Gregg's notion of affect[154], not as completely separate entirely from cognition, but as the capacity of bodies to act and be acted upon:

> Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces-visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion-that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability.[155]

Though the author may directly play the game through the allowances of the scene and the options provided, the player utilises their body outside of the game extensively. They are "double-situated" as a game entity, their interactions with the hardware and software re-embodied in the game as it responds to their input, establishing a shared phenomenological physicality with the author.[156] As I navigate *MEC:R* I may find shared frustrations or physical

153 Carolyn Handler Miller, *Digital Storytelling: A Creator's Guide to Interactive Entertainment* (Amsterdam Boston: Elsevier/Focal Press, 2004): 89-105

154 Melissa Gregg, Gregory J. Seigworth, and Sara Ahmed, eds, *The affect theory reader* (Duke University Press, 2010).

155 Melissa Gregg: 2.

156 Astrid Ensslin, "Respiratory Narrative: Multimodality and Cybernetic Corporeality in "Physio-Cybertext"", in *New Perspectives on Narrative and Multimodality* (Routledge, 2009): 169–79.

responses with Camilleri, through trying to adequately control my on-screen presence; the physical acts and emotional responses to the game space I experience blurring the separation of my in and out of game self. By making the task an extended, complex act of play—rather than a single button to carry out my intention (press X to pick up an object, or click to open a door)—the conditions of play become more active and involved. This is most obvious in the game track *Precisone,* where players must manipulate two hands on the screen using two separate sets of keys, trying to thread a needle through increasingly smaller holes. The subtitle of the game ("Shaky hands and childhood dreams") tells players that this task was not necessarily easy to Camilleri; the use of 6 separate keys to play the game, and the quick slide of the hands around the screen, makes sure it is not necessarily easy for me either. In this way I may become more aware and more insightful through my active participation in the task; I am frustrated at my own inability to manipulate my keyboard correctly and quickly enough to complete the task, and so I share some resentment of the task with Camilleri.

MEC:R most often provides playful content without the author's contexts when the matter at hand is rooted in bodily experiences, and a great deal of my play prioritises awareness of bodily presence, sensations and reactions. Where Camilleri's anecdotes of play focus around the feeling of a generic task rather than a specific memorable moment, I am let loose to understand these experiences through my own abilities and reactions. Tasks such as the complex hand-eye coordination challenge in *Precisone* help me to understand Camilleri through my own affective responses. The meaning that I find takes precedence is the immediate frustration, embarrassment and attention elicited by the event, and by my success or failure carrying out the action.

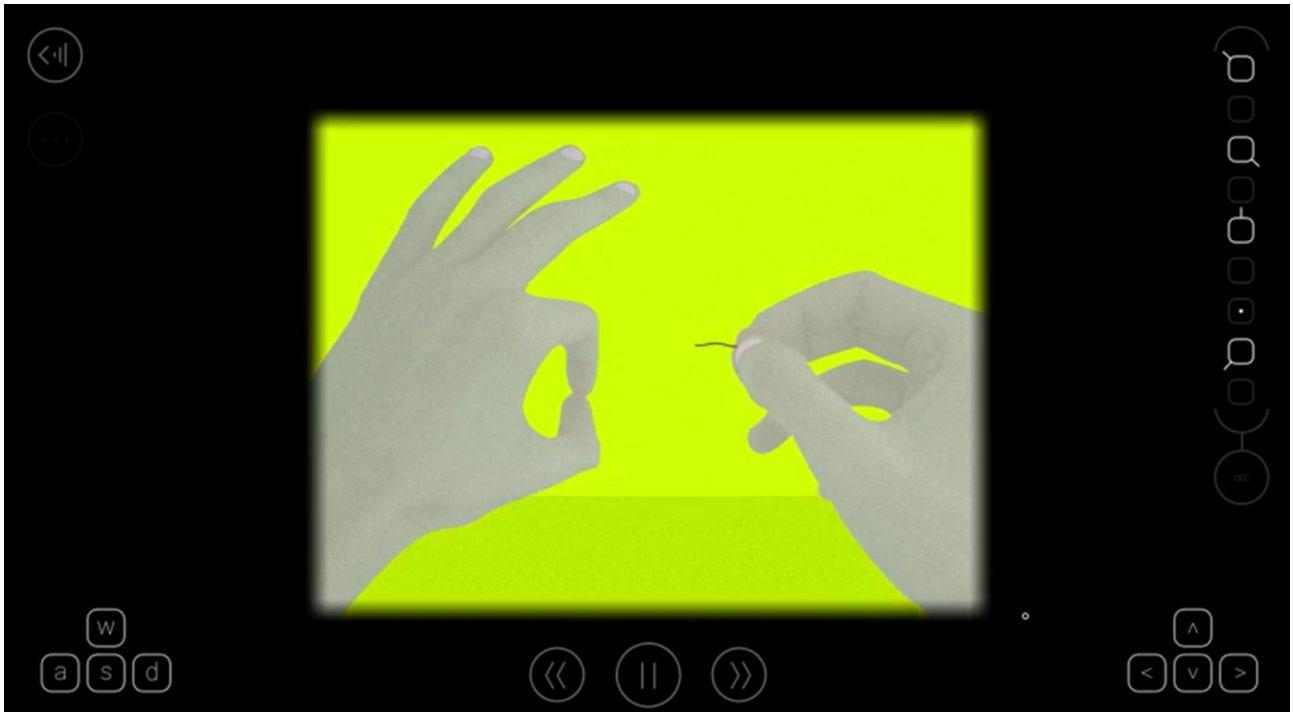


Figure 12: The game track "Precisone", showing two hands on screen trying to thread a needle, with separate controls listed for each one.

In autobiographical games, though the hands I manipulate on the screen or the eyes I gaze out from may nominally be the author's, I am asked here to commit my attention, my focus, my physicality differently than many digital games would otherwise assign to a task. Two of the scenes in the game track *Oranje,* for example, focus the player on small moments of impulsive responses that arise when surprised by others; one shows two hands negotiating a greeting [Figure 13], the other focuses on trying to greet another person in an unfamiliar language [Figure 14]. The actions themselves are small (shake someone's hand, say "no, thank you"), but here Camilleri breaks them down into moments of play requiring my attention and body to navigate.

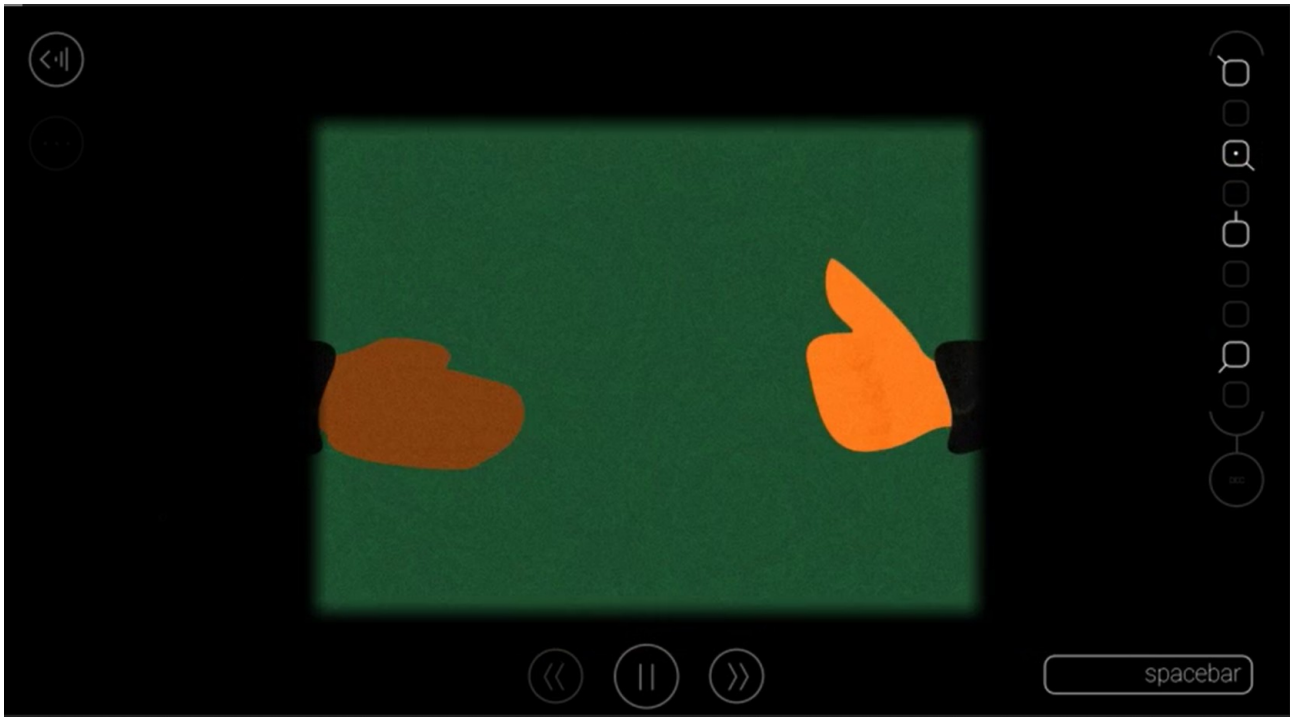


Figure 13: One of the five interaction in the gametrack "Oranje", showing two hands getting closer together. The hands cycle between a handshake, a thumbs up, and a fistbump.

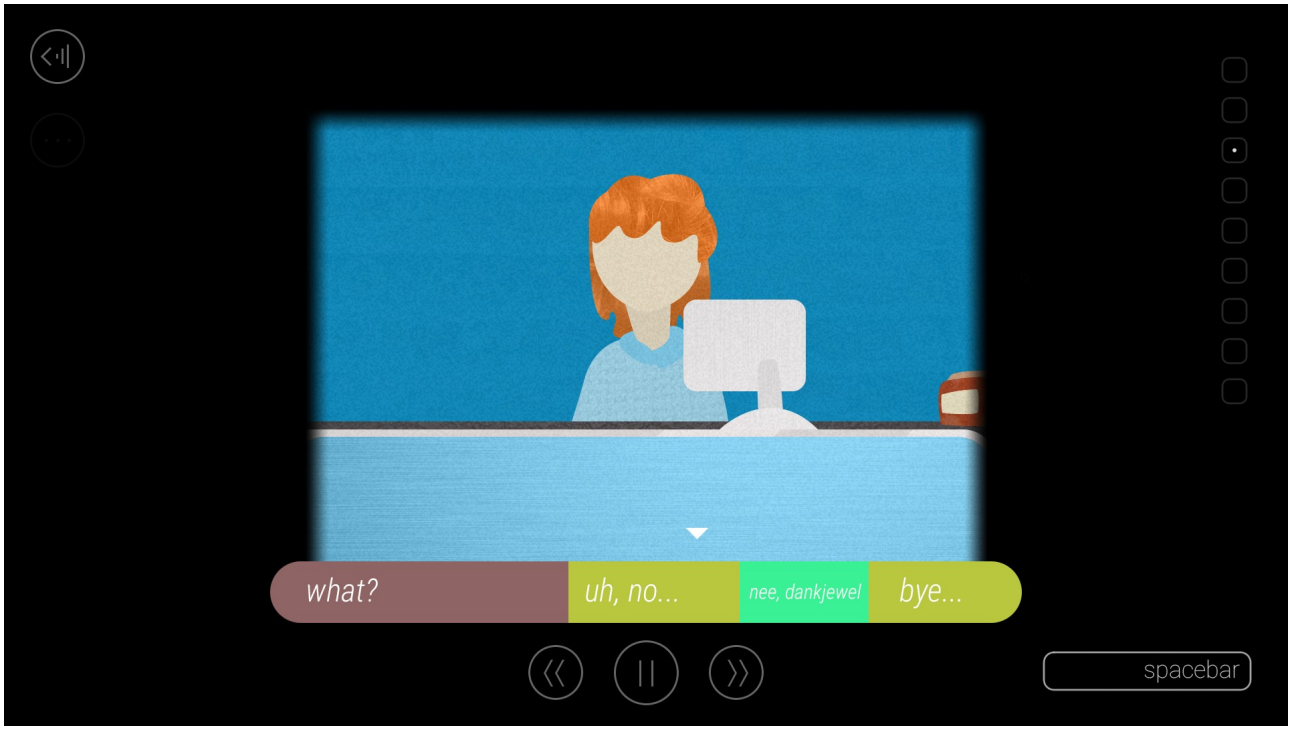


Figure 14: One of the five interactions in game track “Oranje”, showing a cashier waiting for a response, and a bar of possible options.

The action in both scenes is quick-paced, and begins as soon as the scene is opened—requiring a speed read of the situation. I panic, just a little, as I try to time a button press to choose the right option between a handshake or a fist-bump, or taking a quick guess at what the correct response to a cashier would be before passing the socially acceptable time to answer. Although the only body presence on screen in the second track is that of the cashier awaiting my response, I interpret both scenes through my own bodies responses to the tasks. No access is provided to the author's context for the scene, nor any narrative goal required of me, and so I cannot act in the author's stead—I act as myself instead. The lack of information, the cold opening, and the mere moments to react—all may invoke in me a flustered state much akin to an unexpected social awkwardness, and so are as much a part of understanding the interaction as the actual act of timing the move correctly. By amalgamating his experiences into one representative task, placed into the player's own hands, Camilleri invites players to know him through shared moments.

This same use of task-orientated presence can be seen in Melody Lee's *Indelible,*[157] a game comprising three short vignettes about dealing with an unexpected period in public. Built around this shared social-body experience, rather than a specific memory from a specific person's life, *Indelible* strips background, foreshadowing or context completely. Instead, the game simply throws players straight into the action of the first vignette—rushing to a public bathroom, attempting to cover a visible blood stain—assuming the player has some context and knowledge to ground the experience.

By being in direct control of my responses within the game, I find myself confronting the shame or embarrassment bodily functions can bring. In the second vignette, a struggle to correctly position and insert a tampon, the difficulty is exaggerated by an unpredictability of movement in relation to the mouse input. Though I see the body I am responsible for on-screen, through a side-on view of abstract line art [Figure 15], the frustrations of the moment and battles with my physical existence are conveyed through my bodily connection to the mechanic. I find a myself in a similar situation in the third game of *Indelible*, though my physical presence on screen has disappeared. The screen shows me only a pair of underwear, from which I am trying to clean blood stains [Figure 16]. As I repositioning the item under the water with the mouse in one hand and mashing buttons to scrub with the other, the lack of visible hands on-screen does not inhibit my connection to the shame this body brought me, or the unfairness of this moment.

157 Melody Lee, 2015, https://melodily.itch.io/indelible.

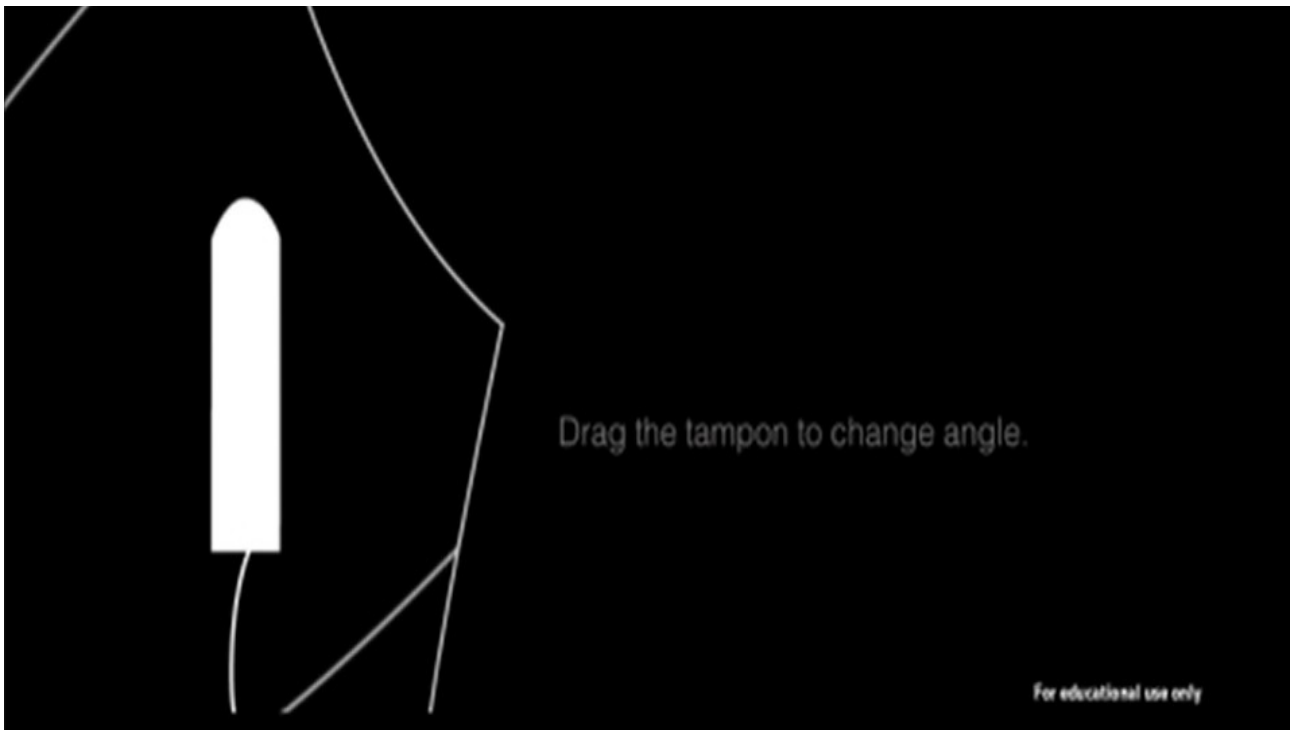


Figure 15: The second game from "Indelible", showing a lineart outline of the middle of a body, and a tampon which needs to be inserted.

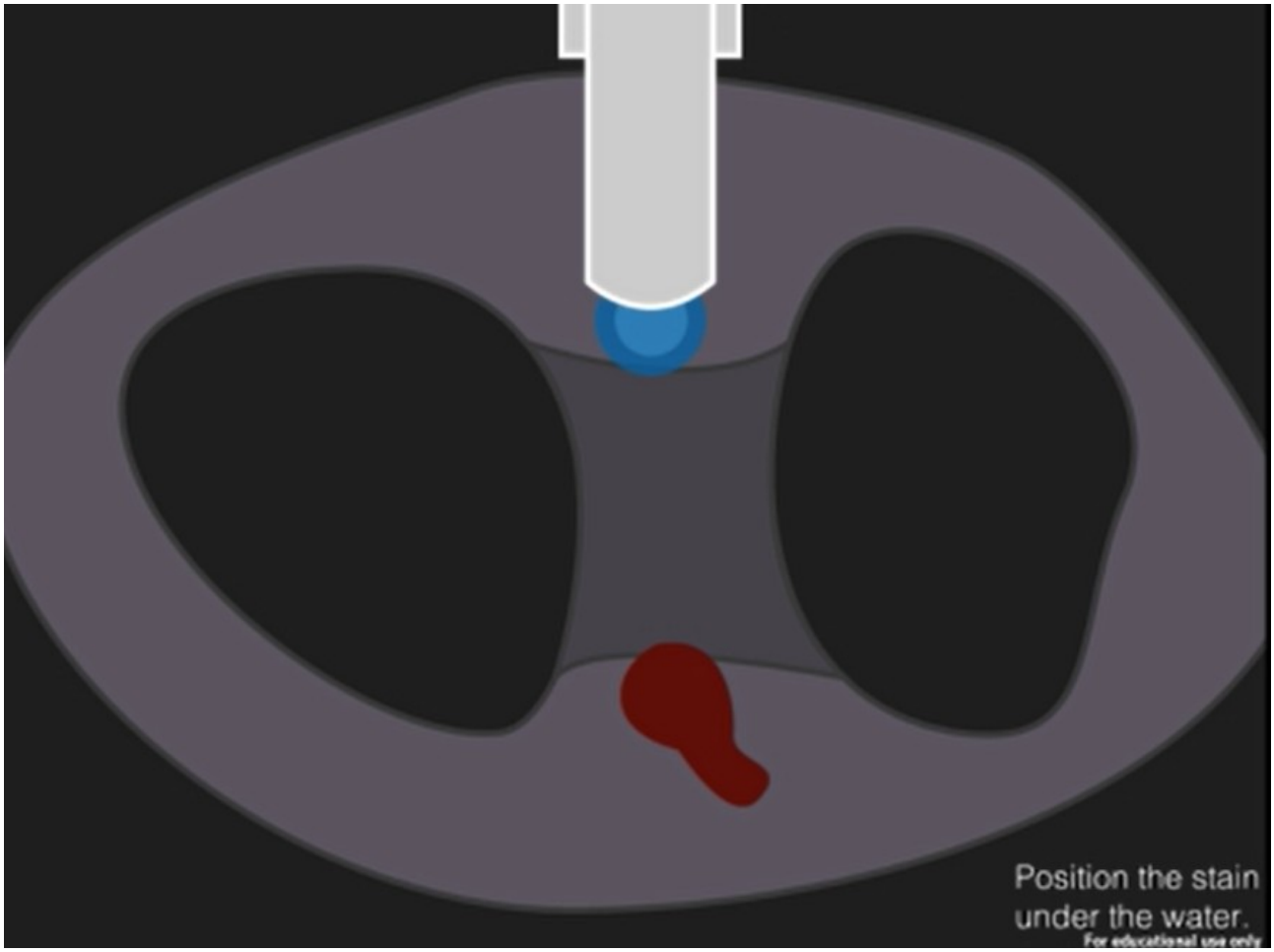


Figure 16: The third game of "Indelible", showing a bloodstained pair of underwear positioned underneath a tap.

That a lack of physical/visual form should not inhibit protagonist positioning suggests inserting ourselves as an immediate presence is not as simple as hopping into a waiting vessel. Indeed, throughout *MEC:R*, my bodily sense of presence takes many varied forms. I may be a pair of hands, or even just the one hand, or my presence as a body within the game may be merely implied. The game track *Silippo* is formatted entirely in the style of a text adventure or interactive narrative [Figure] but it is crafted such that player access to the narrative it tells is immediate and close.

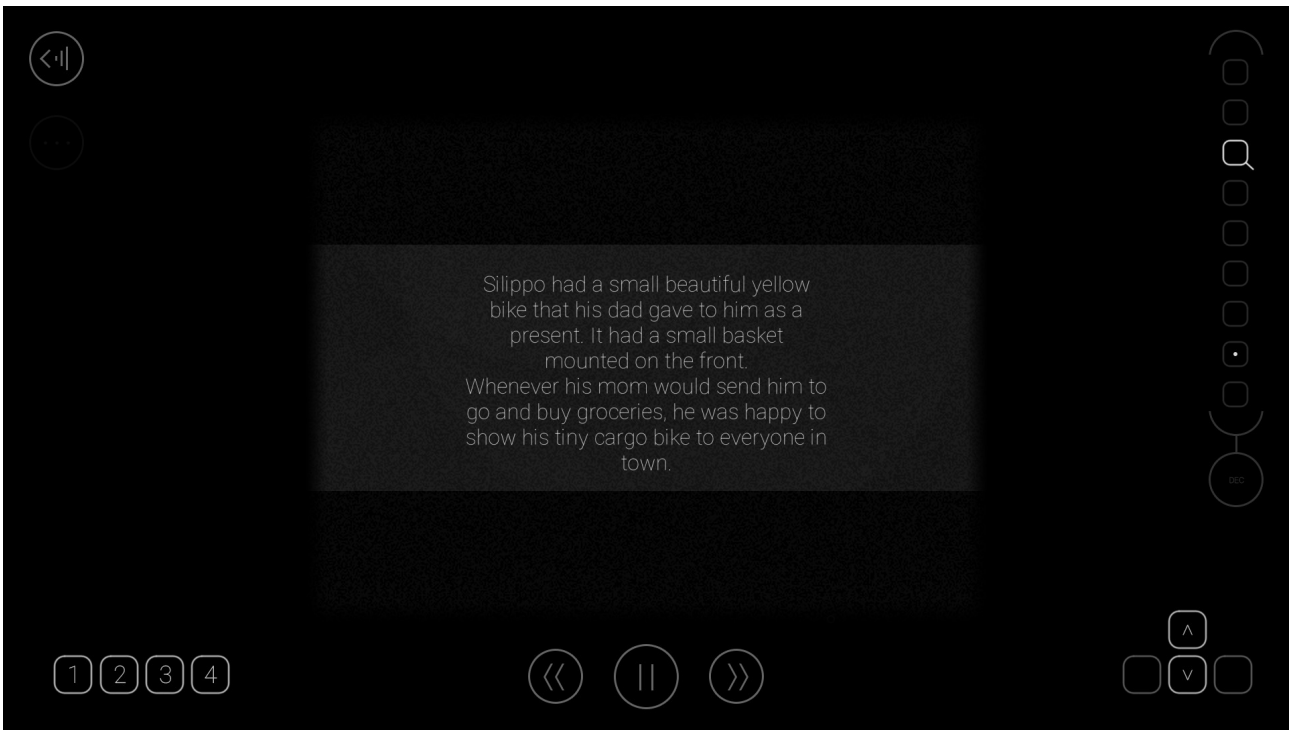


Figure 17: The game track "Silippo", subtitled "a bedtime story".

In this track, which I also argue as *MEC:R*'s most traditionally narrative moment, I am told a bedtime story. My body is missing entirely from the scene (I see only white text on a black background), yet I still find ourselves receiving bodily information as I listen to the tale. My body becomes a known presence through the aesthetic presentation of the scene, if not a visible one; as the tale continues, the text visually blurs and fades, its content becoming less coherent. Looking at the scene on the screen, my eyes can understand a bodily response through the altered text—I am becoming unfocused on the voice that speaks to me, not 'hearing' as clearly as before; perhaps I am falling asleep. The playable portion of the screen—my vision, from within myself—is reduced over time as I mumble responses. Eventually, my input to the tale is blurred out and illegible, just as the text becomes more nonsensical, as I struggle to stay awake and active in the storytelling. Like falling asleep, my slowly closing eyelids are not necessarily a voluntary function. I can understand what my involuntary closing

eyes means; that my body is not always fully under my control. Though I see only the text, I am provided poetic feedback to shape a bodily experience.

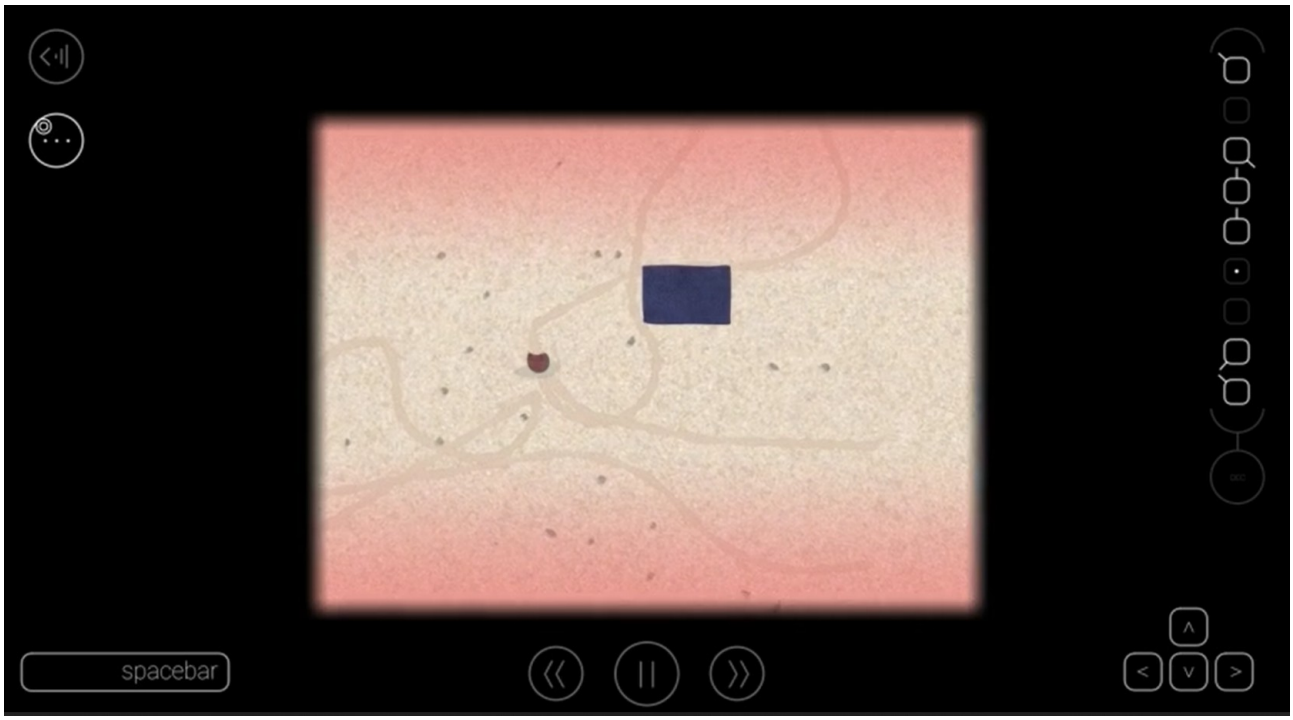


Figure 18: The game track "SSS", showing a figure, viewed from above, wandering around a sandy beach.

This bodily awareness may come from a specific recreation of an internal system or provide the context to a whole scene; though it may be difficult to recreate senses beyond sight and sound, the player can at least perceive the entirety of a situation to better grasp what those senses may have told them. Even with a body on screen, I may watch my body from afar but still be present in the scene in a very immediate sense. When my locus of bodily control is far removed—watching my avatarial body wander a beach from above as in the game track *S.S.S*, for example [Figure 18]—despite my displacement from the body I am provided, I may feel our presence is still my own. Players are given no task to complete in *S.S.S*, no guidance on where to go, no time limit or suggestions; the scene allows me to enjoy it however I choose. With the author's influence over my actions not noticeably present in the scene, and nothing to understand but the sensation of a day at the beach, there is no cognitive demand to comprehend another's specific motives. Though I am far from my avatar, I am present wholly in the scene, without any obvious detachment.

In *Indelible's* first game, I find this same duality of visual separation yet affective closeness. Here, my relinquished control over the on-screen body as a whole serves to reinforce a different sensation to focus my attention; namely, that of self-consciousness. Almost on autopilot, my in-game entity, which I watch from above, navigates their way to the nearest

restroom. Removed from any meaningful control (the body moves forward without my input), I must watch this body, external from it, and see how it elicits the stares of strangers [Figure 19]; I focus my physicality on hiding the stain I bear with a handbag, swinging my hands from

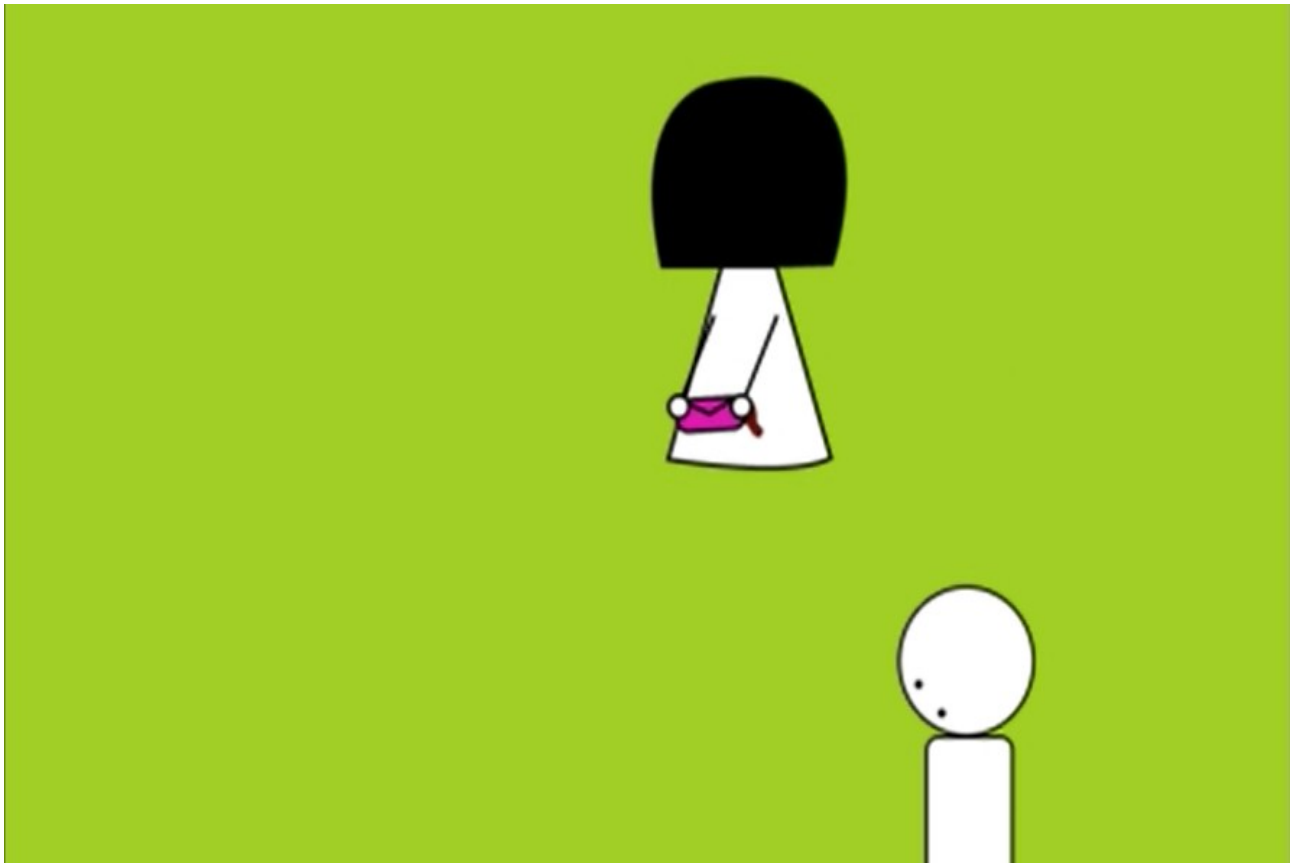


Figure 19: The first game from "Indelible", showing a figure walking forward while others walk in the opposite direction, turning to stare.

4.3.2 Player as protagonist-proxy: contextual connection

While the player as protagonist position arises from the player using their own affective responses to understand and interpret the game world (and so the author's experience), the player as protagonist-proxy position arises from their cognitive connection to the game instead. The player as a proxy for the author's actions and choices may take on a near-protagonist role; namely, they are given some level of control over the scene but are distanced from their immediate affective responses. They are instead focused on understanding their actions within the contexts of the game scene. Stepping away from the close self-focus of the protagonist, this positioning becomes a veneer of the author over my own in-game presence. I perform as or alongside the author who becomes spectatorial, directing and shadowing my actions as I act in tandem with them. In this sense, the protagonist-proxy position sees me to some extent as a puppet-player in the scene. My performances are shaped through the author's stage directions and contexts, the form I take in the game space, the actions and choices that are available to me, and the reactions that the game world offers back. Players can

step into more complex situations with their intentions and interpretations, with any necessary prior understanding of the scene provided by the author's guidance.

I read this protagonist-proxy positioning in *MEC:R* particularly in the space between playing Camilleri's life and merely watching it. In scenes of the game track *Oranje,* I find myself greeting party hosts nonsensically for reasons I do not understand. I know that this is a birthday (there is a cake, a party hat, and a large and unsubtle arrow pointing to a character which says "her birthday" [Figure 20]). However, I, like many players, do not share the cultural knowledge of birthday traditions in the Netherlands. As I move down the line, Camilleri guides my hand by providing a response appropriate to the situation, one I would have no context of my own to provide. The author here acts through my input, and I must interpret this action as best I can with the information I have been provided.

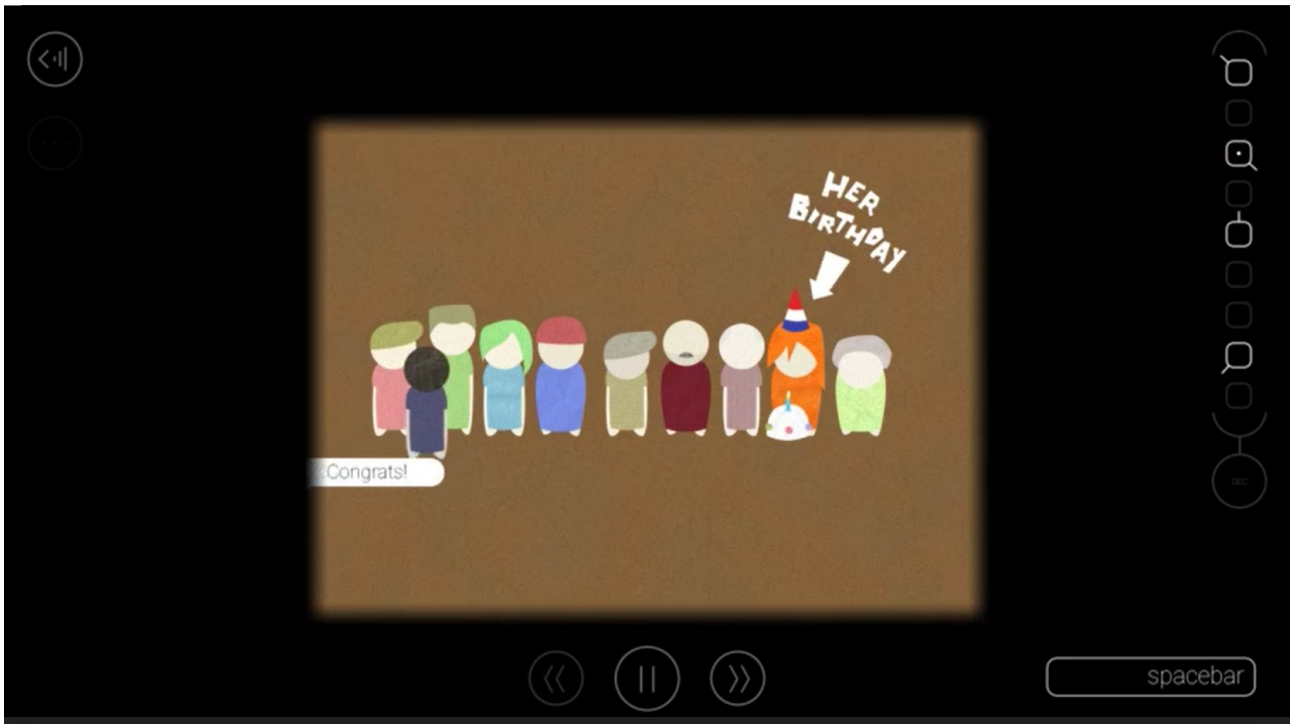


Figure 20: A scene from the game track "Oranje", showing a figure saying "congrats!" to a line of people before arriving at the person whose birthday it is.

Another more complex example of such conversation in that space between playing can be seen in the track *Øresund.* My version of Camilleri talks to a faceless woman in a train station, the conversation moving forward as facilitated by my choices [Figure 21]. My stand-in avatar is unmoving, placed between the other party to the conversation and my own position, observing the conversation externally. Facing away from me as we talk through the open doorway of a train, I stare at the back of my protagonist-proxy presence, the conduit through which I speak but a body I do not control.

Figure 21: The game track "Øresund" subtitled "the goodbye bridge"

As I begin to unfold what this conversation is, and whom we are talking to, my conversation flickers through time; clothes change with each new attempt to connect to our partner, whole chunks of conversation appear to be missing. I am not acting out a conversation as myself, but investigating a number of previous conversations through small moments of Camilleri's memory. I am provided with a selection of sentences to choose from, space for me to act how I believe Camilleri would or should have done, but they are filtered through his own voice and memories—the options all reflect the same sombre, frustrated tone.

Though the responses from which I choose are presented to me in the exact way I say them (rather than, say, the topic-based prompts of larger roleplaying games such as *Mass Effect*, or the emotional response systems seen in games such as *L.A. Noire*), my player positioning as an agent in the scene has me move away from a full protagonist role. I as a player am an external entity, watching two other people talk from outside the body I speak through on the screen. More importantly, I as a player am outside of the conversation that I participate in. The history behind it, the details of my author-self's reactions, are inconsequential to my understanding of the conversation's tone. I cannot, at any point, even see my own face. A layer of emotional distance yawns between me the player, and me the character; even more so, me and whoever it is that I'm speaking with, and the reality of where the conversation has come from. I understand what these moments were, to Camilleri, through deciphering through his lens (as the author persona) on one hand, and my own (as the player external to the game) on the other.

However, this cognitive understanding between author and player does not necessarily imply a static in-game presence or rely on interactive fiction or written game narrative. In the track *Laurana*, after a brief opening message explaining that exams are approaching, players are in charge of a god-like, top-down management game as they pilot a white square (Camilleri, they can reasonably assume) around a noisy house. Managing to study becomes almost a puzzle, a balance of focus on the avatar and the game's information overlay— two aspects of bodily/cognitive awareness in the scene. I monitor the ever-decreasing time until my exam with one eye and the increase in my knowledge with the other, while constantly redirecting the avatar under my control to flee the noises created by others [Figure 22]. I am not inhabiting the house or the moment in a bodily sense, but instead attempting a strategic placing of my cube-self in the game map, monitoring resources and the approaching threats.

Figure 22: The game track "Laurana" subtitled "studying while mastering noise".

While this splintering of my attention may aptly recreate a stressful situation and invoke flustered, distracted responses, contextually I do not know whom I am avoiding, what I am studying, or why. What matters here is not what I would do when presented with all the facts, so much as that I can understand the frustrations Camilleri felt under these particular constraints. The fine detail does not, to the player, convey any extra meaning—and so does not, in the context of the scene, really matter. There is a distance between my actions and my complete understanding of them, similar to the dexterity games I play when positioned as the protagonist. Here, though, I am asked to understand not the motions I make or the affective frustrations of the task, but the complexity of the situation and the actions of the author. I

study under the circumstances of Camilleri, using his own room-switching strategy, to understand the complicated balancing of expectations and external pressures; my full visual of the house plan, the context-setting of the opening screen text paragraphs and the interface progress bars all ask me to act with a narrative commitment to the author's experience. I amalgamate these experiences to approximate Camilleri's cognitive and bodily awarenesses, and I act according to his habits. My only alternative is to walk my cube out the door and leave. Although I control the on-screen body, I am proxy to Camilleri and his experiences; I do not know the habits of the cube-people around me, the significance of the test I am studying for, or the house I wander around in. I do even know what it is that I am studying.

Where *Laurana* provides some context in the form a clear onscreen overlay, however, in other places I am asked to interpret contexts more poetically. In *Otoloop,* I watch my game body and its reflection stare at each other in the mirror through a game track that loops endlessly unless skipped in the game's minimal interface. I see a version of my player/author self growing out hair and then getting it cut under my instruction; when I see this action generating negative experiences (a host of red eyes glaring toward my exposed ears) I am steered toward questioning the narrative or personal meaning to the actions I am forced to take repeatedly. This filtering of action through author contexts which are obscured from me is reinforced by the poetic subversion of the expectations established in other tracks—that I will carry out a small task and then progress forward to the next game. I am encouraged to consider the connection between my actions and the game's (and so, the author's) unusual response, as I fail to escape negative patterns of thought and behaviour, no matter what my own intentions outside the game may be. I am a positioned as a proxy for Camilleri's own experiences, acting under their influences despite my own responses to the situation.

By curating the experience of the player through a protagonist-proxy and therefore distanced position, the player has just enough context to form their own understanding of the author's personal content within the scene. This understanding, developed through the player's own actions, begins with the salient details the scene provides; such as a conversation that frequently occurs at a train station goodbye, or a house that is too loud to study. Positioning a player as a protagonist-proxy offers a distance between the author's potentially very personal lived experiences and the player's in-game actions, overlapping the two through the details that are key to whatever meaning the player is asked to explore. I find myself closed off from the most intimate moments, separated from being wholly in the scene, my in-game presence, and even the full emotional weight of context and consequence. The tools to understand the author are the contexts within which I act, and the interactions illustrating what the author

would, or did attempt. As an author proxy character, players may find their choices, actions or presence in the game world more directly influenced by the author's experiences or memories. Positioned with the author between myself and the moment the vignette explores, I negotiate my responses and desires through the filter of the author's presence. Where I aim to understand both the game scene and space and the motivations or responses of my avatar, I translate my actions through the contexts of the author's experience. To a certain extent, I am walking alongside the author in the scene—both of us on the same path, but with our experiences shaped by our personal context. The author-shaped version of the player as proxy comes with internal complications; restrictions placed to recreate, resemble or reflect on the author's own lived experiences, through my own interpretations of my play. As the author though, my presence is a cast shadow, a poetic rather than literal translation of their lived experience, directed by their presence and the interactive possibilities they have provided.

4.3.3 Player as witness: observation and distance

The player position as witness presents perhaps the most subversive mode of player positioning. The player as witness is the furthest away from the widely accepted notion in larger video game productions, that a player should have a direct impact on or control of the game world around them. This position also refutes the notion that game worlds as objects exist around the player (as a character or avatar) at their narrative centre. By positioning a player as a witness to the events, memories or feelings shown within the game, there exists a playful method of sharing personal experiences without players reshaping them through their play. Positioning as witness, then, allows players access to lived experiences without placing them in the position of the author. Relying on the evocative aesthetic and narrative elements to give the player a sense of meaning, player as witness provides greater control and protection over the way an author's lived experience is accessed, while still granting the player close and open perspectives on the intimate moments being shared.

Positioned as witness, the player is in a sense almost removed from the game as an active agent, playing in the *space* of the personal experience rather than as an active part of the moment the vignette portrays. Where the player's role in the game is diverted away from solving, changing or forming the narrative, they may instead focus on the exploration of a mood, tone or place as the core ludic element of the game. The player may explore the personal experiences simply by navigating through them, as reimagined physical spaces or as collections of memories, stories and items. As such, in its most intimate moments—namely, those dealing with ephemera of Camilleri's life in an unrepresented and literal form—*MEC:R* shifts the player into a passive role almost (though not entirely) disconnected from the play. In

doing so, the act of witnessing becomes an action of curiosity that the player is taking upon themselves, as themself, to see something of the author.

The opening and ending scenes of *MEC:R* (*Pieces* and *Lei Disse*) see me witnessing Camilleri through his personal ephemera, various small items laid before me on a desk [Figure 23]. Though the thoughts that appear on the screen when I click on an item are written in the first person ("I wonder if..."), it is hard to find anything that implies I am assuming the place of the author, that this is my space. Though cognitively I may piece this together from my access to an intimate workspace and having thoughts on the objects available, the emotional connection to the objects on the table is not familiarity but curiosity. The musings triggered by the objects, small snippets without context, could easily be my own. However, as I have no memory of them and no context to explain them, I view them through my own eyes before viewing them through Camilleri's. Though my interactions may flick a light switch or turn a tablet on—confirming me as existing somehow in this digital room—I cannot otherwise alter the items before me, and I am asked to do nothing with them. It is the act of seeing that I have been brought here for, to understand an element of Camilleri's life through our witnessing. Though Camilleri has no physical presence in the game space for this scene, the feeling is of listening to him talk to me as I point out one object, then the next.

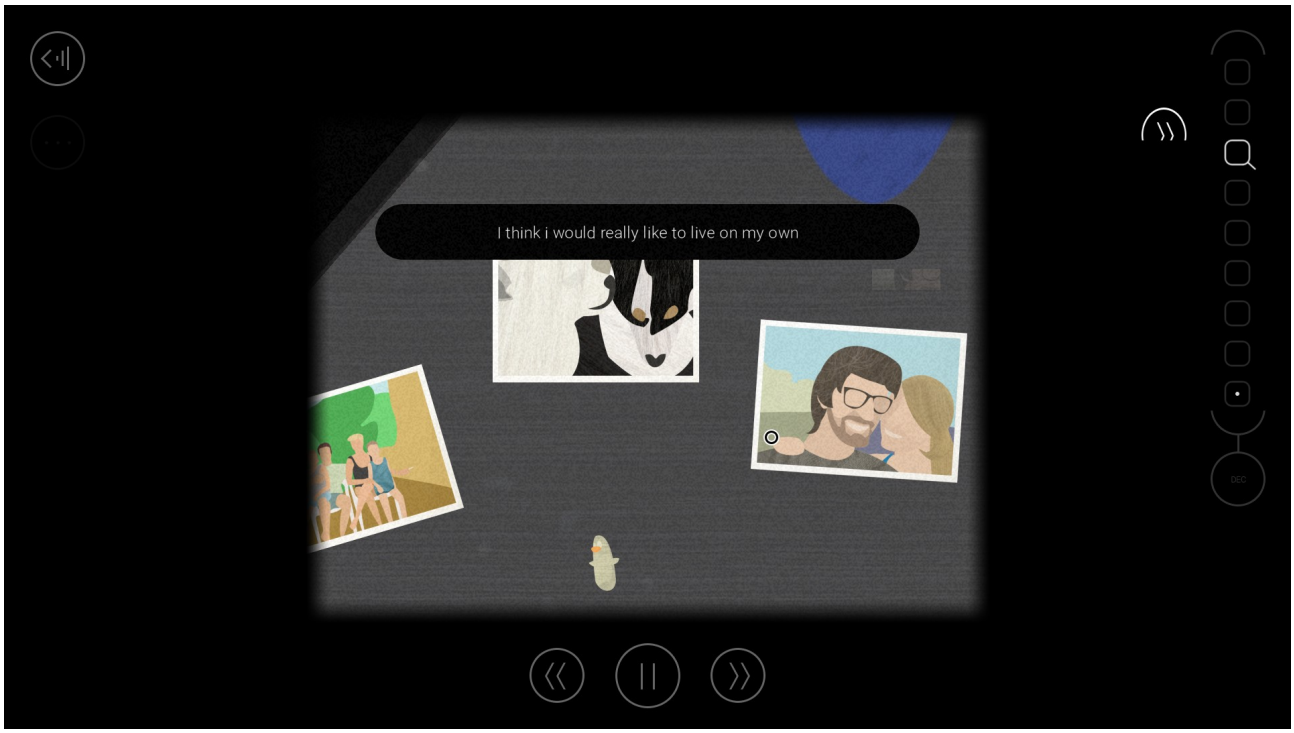


Figure 23: The game track "Lei Disse" subtitled "pieces from my desk", looking at photographs on the table.

This is not to say that positioning a player as a witness requires the player's physical presence to be removed from the scene, visually or interactively. In the same manner as wandering the empty halls of an exhibit, the player may well be located within a physical representation of memory and self, finding themselves in the first-person view and with a visible digital body, but distanced in some other way from the objects and narratives within. In fact, the first interaction of the *MEC:R*, after its title sequence, sees player drags the needle of a record player onto the image of a record which serves as the game's title screen [Figure 24]. This action takes place before any idea of being a character is introduced; arguably the first act the player undertakes in the game is as themselves, but there is not affective response to the scene to understand here. My journey into understanding Camilleri instead begins with a moment of separation between us, as I look at Camilleri's experiences literally as record to be played and lingered over.

Figure 24: The first interactive screen of Memoir En Code: Reissue, where players begin the game by placing a needle onto a record.

The player as a witness may also be seen where the player take on a more exploratory role within the game space, too. The interactive diary game, *Sacramento*[158] for example, is a first-person, 3D space, where the player walks around to investigate and admire the landscape. The player is physically present in the game, as a hand that can be seen on screen when checking a watch for the time [Figure 25]. While the player has a bodily presence in the world, though, the game world responds very little to their passage, offering no interactions, text, or prompts

158 dziff, 2016, https://dziff.itch.io/sacramento.

to act. The game, made up of sketches created by the author, feels almost like a gallery visit where my presence is only for me. To explore the watercolour memories *Sacramento* displays, I am placed bodily into a digital landscape built from the author's sketches, dropped off there quite literally at a train station, then left to explore. I can see the world shift and come to life as animations play when I approach each new feature, the world playfully reacting to me rather than the other way around. I am asked only to admire a world which acknowledges, but does not require, my presence.

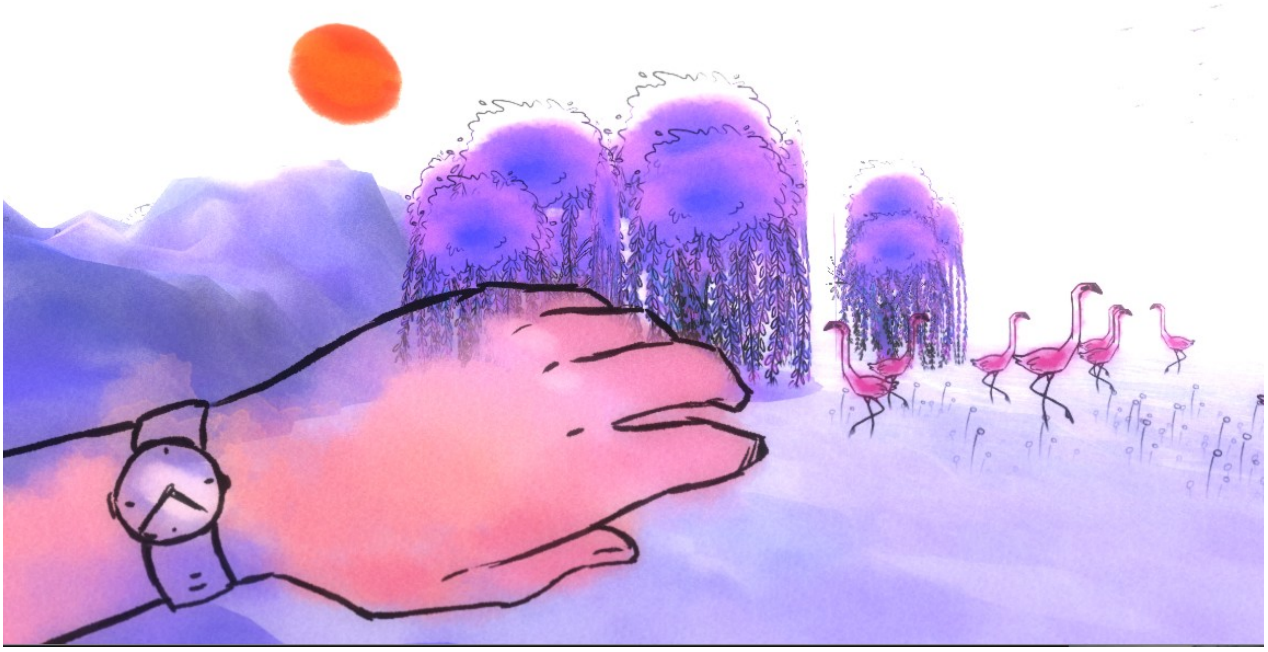


Figure 25: A screenshot showing a hand, wearing a watch, raised onto the screen to check the time in "Sacramento".

Witness player positioning is exemplified in the genre of 'walking simulators', in which active play is centred around the slow uncovering, exploring or deciphering of a game space rather than changing, achieving or altering events.[159] There is a similar approach in interface games —games played via interacting with a simulated technology on the screen—used to present personal experiences through players unearthing digital ephemera. Clicking around the brightly coloured personal desktop of Siobhan Gibson's *My Computer*[160] (a game about exploring the files on Gibson's computer)[161] or flicking through the projector slides depicting

159 Hartmut Koenitz, "Beyond "Walking Simulators"–Games as the Narrative Avant-Garde", extended abstract, in *DiGRA 2017,* 2017.

160 Siobhan Gibson, 2017, https://sgx.itch.io/my-computer.

161 *My Computer* was made by Gibson as part of an early study for my own thesis, a precursor to the interviews in Chapter 5. I asked 6 participants to create a personal game in the tool *Flickgame,* then discussed their experiences in an open interview. This study was ultimately not included in this thesis, as it was an exploratory mini study used to locate potential areas of interest for the interviews that followed.

fading memories in Amy Godliman's *Mushrooms Red As Meat,*[162] players aren't asked to do so with any particular purpose in mind. When I look through these digital artifacts of the author, notes to themselves [Figure 26] or images accompanied by a memory [Figure 27], it is through examining and interpreting the content/aesthetics that I find my understanding of the author.

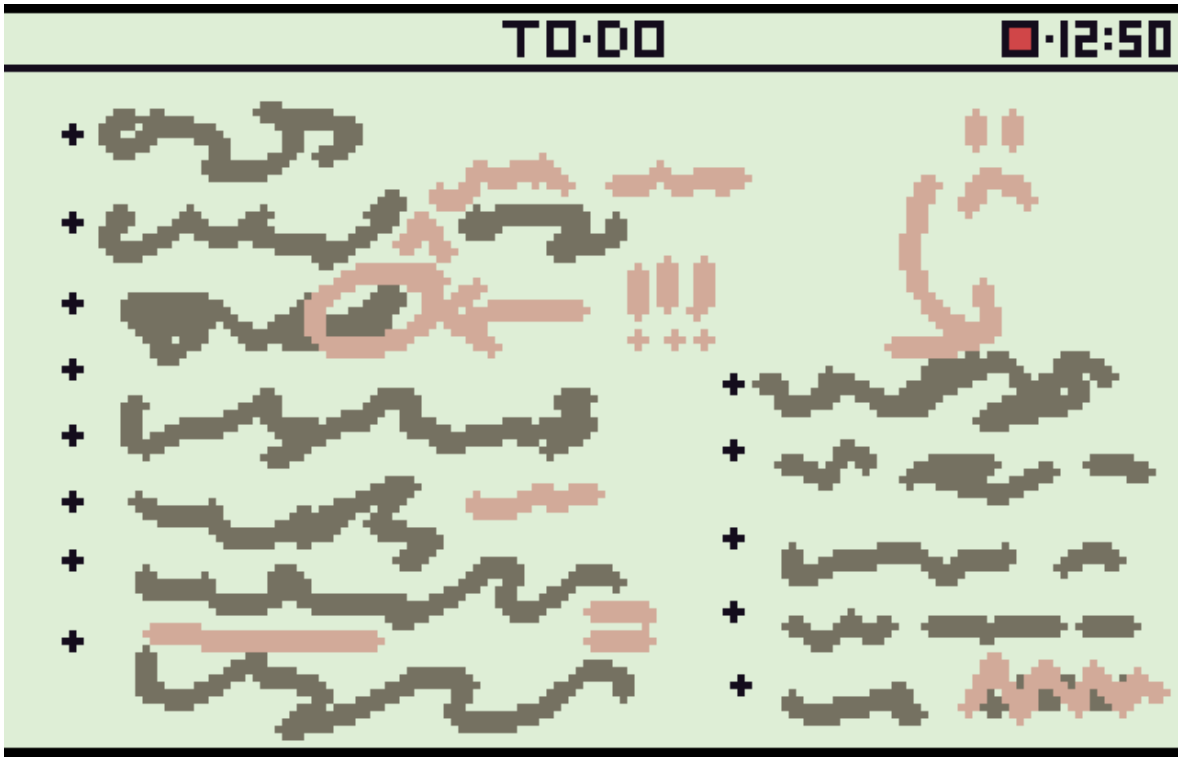


Figure 26: The screen for the file called "to do" in Siobhan Gibson's "My Computer", showing scribbles in grey and pink to indicate listed tasks and annotations.

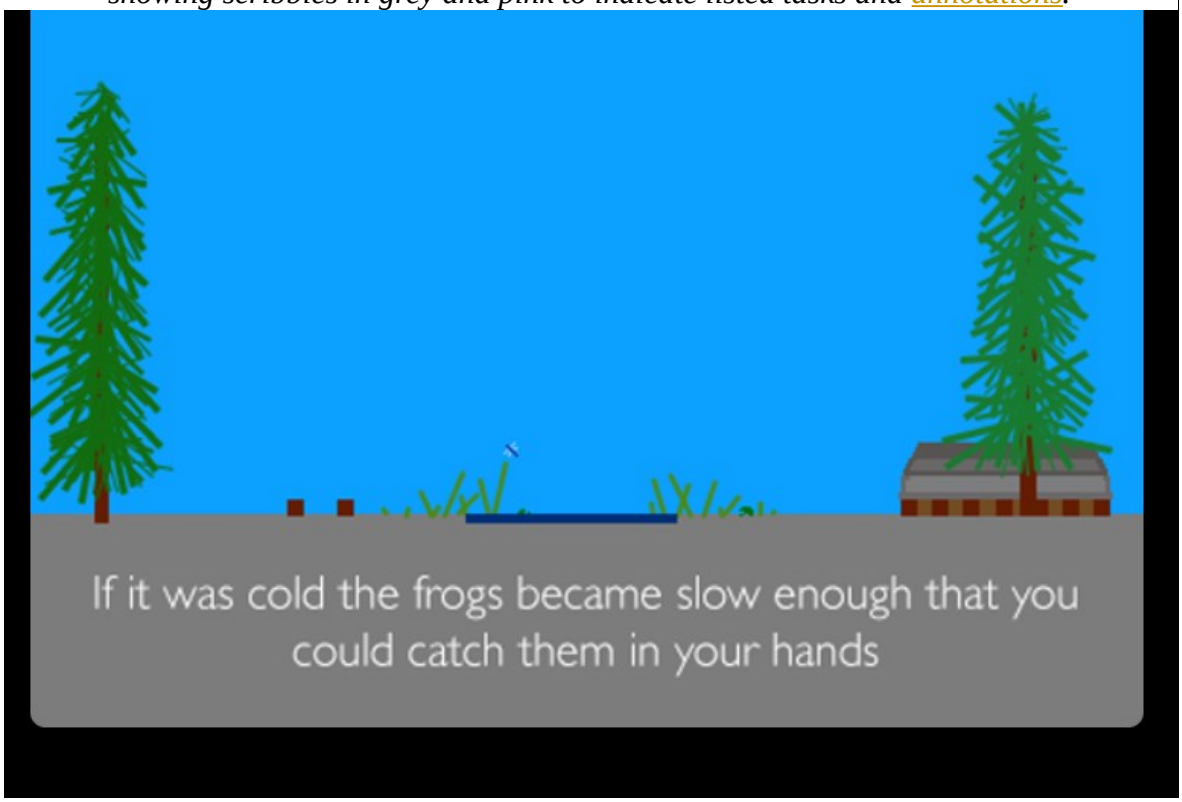


Figure 27: A slide from Amy Godliman's "Mushrooms Red As Meat" showing a picture of a pond.

162 Amy Godliman, 2016, https://acgodliman.itch.io/mushrooms-red-as-meat.

4.3.4 Player positions in parallel

The position of the player, as discussed above, provides the player with a perspective on the games' content in relation to the author and their experiences. Multiple experiences presented together, then, may be accessed through multiple positions. For example, in *and i made sure to hold your head sideways*,[163] a 2018 game by Jenny Jiao Hsia, the player is plausibly positioned as both a protagonist and a witness simultaneously. The game is presented as an unchangeable linear narration (about waking up after a night out with missing memory), as a friend relays the events of the missing night. Fragments of text are delivered alongside deconstructed sketches of the author and others involved in the event [Figure 28]. I have none of the author's contexts for this recollection—I do not know any of these people, or when it happened, or why—and so I follow along with events I was not part of as an onlooker, a listener overhearing a conversation. To read/witness this event meaningfully, however, I perceive it through a protagonist-like element that gives a better understanding of the author's experience remembering and deciphering after the fact.

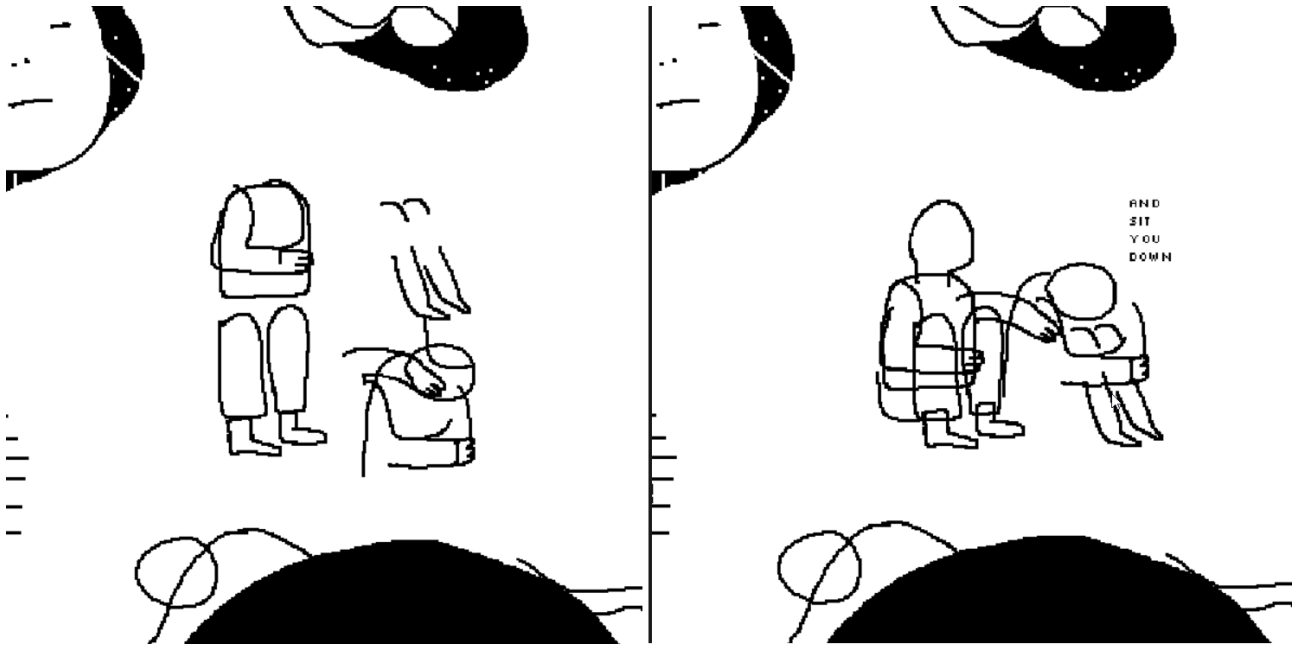


Figure 28: Two screenshots from and i made sure to hold your head sideways, showing a disassembled and reassembled memory.

My interactions with the game see me manipulate the scattered lines of the drawings, moving them around with the keys of my keyboard until a comprehensible image appears; an act not unlike trying to piece together a memory from fragmented, half recalled sensations. I draw an understanding of the tone of the experience through rough outlines of characters and places. In a way, I am the protagonist of the groggy, hungover feeling of partially remembering the

163 Jenny Jiao Hsia, 2017, https://q_dork.itch.io/and-i-made-sure-to-hold-your-head-sideways.

night before, but a witness to the narrative of what actually happened; even once the text an images have come together into something coherent, I am hearing the story of another, without full understanding where, when or why it happened. In this way, I am exploring two aspects of the author's experience from different positions at once.

Though player positioning allows for a fluid sense of connection between author and player, though, that is not to say it addresses all author-player-game tensions—for example, this framework may be harder to incorporate into personal games which are modelled more after traditional story-focused games, where ideas of embodiment or performing as a character/avatar are present. It is also important to remember that the player brings their personal context to the game space, and their own individual sense of their situated self. What may from the author's perspective (consciously or unconsciously) be very firmly a position of witnessing, could to a player with adequate shared experiences feel more like a protagonist positioning, an act they have a bodily connection to. While the aesthetic, poetic and interactive qualities of a personal vignette may all be utilised to position the player a certain way, the players own contexts may shift that perspective to a more intimate or removed position.

4.4 Discussion

This chapter presents a close reading of *MEC:R* and others, to illustrate the use of player positioning as a major contributing factor of how personal vignette game creators can share personal experiences meaningfully through play. Through positioning the player in or somewhere between the *protagonist*, *protagonist-proxy* and *witness* position, personal vignette games can redefine a player's access and immediacy within a game scene, setting the contexts through which the personal content is interpreted. As a protagonist of the experience, players interpret the game through their own bodily connection to its stimulus; as protagonist-proxy they act and examine the scene under the direction of the author, interpreting the scene through the author's provided contexts; as witness, players perceive some aspect of the author as it is staged for them, from a distance. Thus, player positioning becomes a powerful tool for the personal vignette game, providing creators with a variety of ways to share their life experiences while forging connections to or creating distance between themselves and the player.

Through this reading of player positioning, I argue that repositioning the player's locus of understanding and rebalancing the weight of their doubly-situated self creates intimate moments of shared experience and understanding. In this way, I believe that *MEC*:*R* uses the fuzzy, interpretive notion of the self within the game to obtain an intimate, personal tone of

play. Whether through their own actions and responses, guided by the contexts and presence of Camilleri alongside them, or simply from observing the personal collages left by the author, the player is invited to understand another's experience through a nebulous, negotioable space between the author and themself. While it may seem at odds with the intentions of personal works to create them through shared acts of play, Camilleri's *MEC:R* highlights the identity-ambiguity of player positioning as an interesting solution for sharing the intricacies of ineffable personal experience; not as objective fact, but as embodied and contextualised personal perspectives. Asking the player to constantly renegotiate their contextual, cognitive and bodily relationship to the screen and the author through positioning, *MEC:R* offers players a myriad of perspectives on Camilleri's own life.

Finally, this examination of player positioning primarily explores how a game's aesthetics, contexts and interactive/somatic experiences inform the perspective of the player and their closeness to the author. However, influences from the game's external framing—such as how the player is introduced to elements of the game and its meaning through the game pages and texts surrounding it—should not be ignored, particularly as aspects of the player position rely upon the player's bodily connection to and contextual understanding of the game's content. Though a sense of self within game space may be heavily influenced by the way players see, hear, act and understand within the game, they are not immune to the contexts of when, where and how the game is encountered within the physical world.

In conclusion: *MEC:R* and the other readings discussed here demonstrate the potential power of an abstract, impermanent identity within personal narrative games; somewhere between lived, recreated or observed life experiences, meaningful understanding of the author's sense of self within the game arises. The use of shifting player positioning allows for an interpretive, nuanced understanding of the authors through various perspectives and proximities to and of them, in the face of the self-driven and emergent meaning-making by the player, as a co-creator and performer.

From the collaborative play of experiences explored in this chapter, it becomes clear that personal vignette games are not simply recreating the author's experiences for players, nor telling them a story with the author as merely an actor. Although player positioning helps to connect players to the fuzzy and complicated author presence within the games from their own point of view, though, it is only one part of a two sided connection. The player is, after all, in conversation with an *author*; as such, I move now from the player as co-creator and performer to the next of my triangulated points of understanding, the author themselves.

5. Creator experiences of making personal vignette games

> I think considering informal videogame development practices will ultimately challenge us to expand our perception of just what videogame development is: who is making videogames, and to what end[164]

In the previous chapter, I examined the negotiations of ownership/agency/access that can be perceived through a personal vignette game's positioning of the player. I also established the connections between author and player that this positioning fosters, and how different player positions present different ways of understanding the author's experiences to the player. This chapter, then, contextualises those ideas by exploring the perspectives of personal game creators themselves; shifting the focus away from readings of their experiences to exploring? their own intents and identities.

In terms of my research question, *how are vignette games used to explore personal experiences,* the perspective offered in this chapter is twofold, focusing primarily on the sub-question *what are the authors' connections to the personal vignette game*. Through these interviews, I examined the ways creators engage with their games, tools, practices, ideas, communities, audiences and selves. These interviews, then, help not only to provide the practicalities of how creators speak about themselves through personal vignette games, but also to answer, with equally valuable insight, why they might wish to do so.

To this end, I present a reflective thematic analysis of a series of interviews with personal vignette creators, which explored the creative and emotional experiences of personal vignette game creators. The study presented in this chapter is comprised of 16 interviews with personal vignette game creators; the analysis of those interviews offers insight into creators' motivations for making, experiences with audience engagement, personal intents and perceptions of games as creativity. I begin this chapter by explaining the interview and analysis process in section 5.1. I present the approach taken for the interviews in 5.1.1, and an overview of the participants and how they were selected in 5.1.2. Section 5.1.3 explains the reflective thematic analysis I used to analyse the interview data for creator motivations and methods. In section 5.2 I present the final themes drawn from the interviews; *facilitated game creation* (5.2.1), *playing with form* (5.2.2), *challenging perceptions and making statements* (5.2.3), *managed terms of engagement* (5.2.4), and *seeing and being seen* (5.2.5).

164 Brendan Keogh, "Who Else Makes Videogames? Considering Informal Development Practices", *Brendan Keogh Blog* (blog), 2017, https://brkeogh.com/2017/07/11/who-else-makes-videogames-considering-informal-development-practices/.

In section 5.3 I go on to provide three approaches to personal vignette game design informed by these themes, which utilise game creation *through* positive restriction, *as* a playful creativity and *for* self expression. Finally, I conclude in 5.4 that personal vignette game creation is redefining creative and self-expressive possibilities for game makers, broadening the scope of what games are permitted to do, say, or be.

Despite the substantial ground covered on games as spaces for human growth and reflection, and while there are studies highlighting the benefits of reflective experiences in *play*,[165] there is less work to be found on reflective experiences as experience while *making* games. Recent investigations into designing reflective games do agree that context and intention are important components of reflective game design,[166] but a creator-focused rather than object-focused approach may close some gaps between the examination of personal games and the ways in which they are created through personal experiences. These interviews also aim to centre creators and communities in the critical dialogue around the games they are creating, and to contribute to ongoing conversations of inclusion, diversity and audience expectations around informal game creation.

5.1 Interview approach and analysis

The study presented in this chapter is a reflexive thematic analysis, as codified by Braun and Clarke[167] (see Chapter 3.2 for details on this approach). This analysis reviews 16 interviews undertaken with personal vignette game creators, to obtain insight into creator experiences of personal game creation and publishing. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they offered the opportunity to be more adaptive to the creators' varying interests and contexts than set surveys; as the study was primarily interested in personal experience, the ability to investigate each participant's unique path was deemed to be beneficial to achieving richer data. The semi-structured nature allowed for discussions to stray from the core areas of interest, with around half of most interviews led by the participants' own personal experiences and interests.

Due to the personal nature of the works discussed in the interviews, a number of steps were taken to ensure the safety and comfort of participants. Care was taken throughout the interviews to continuously check in with participant comfort levels as new topics were

165 Elisa D Mekler, Ioanna Iacovides, and Julia Ayumi Bopp, ""A Game that Makes You Question…" Exploring the Role of Reflection for the Player Experience", in *Proceedings of the 2018 annual symposium on computer-human interaction in play,* 2018: 315-327.

166 Sabine Harrer and Henrik Schoenau-Fog, "Inviting Grief into Games: The Game Design Process as Personal Dialogue", in *DiGRA 2015: Diversity of play: Games – Cultures – Identities*, DiGRA, 2015.

167 Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke "Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis" *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11, no. 4 (2019): 589-597.

discussed, and to check afterwards that participants were still happy to have their answers included in the study. To reduce potential negative interview experiences for participants, a list of various online support networks was provided alongside their consent forms. By default, participants were anonymous in the study; however, all participants chose instead to be named alongside their quotations, and any discussion of their works.[168]

A number of the interviews contained discussion of games developed in response to traumatic events or distressing personal experiences; some of these discussions were provided for additional context to the analysis, but have been omitted from explicit inclusion in the findings by request.

5.1.1 Interviews

The interviews with creators took the form of one-on-one discussions, each between 35 to 65 minutes, and were primarily conducted through online voice calls (though one interview took place face-to-face at the interviewee's home, due to the ease of doing so and the participant's preference). The interviews primarily explored methods of creation (design habits, use of software and tools, etc.), motivations for making and sharing, aspects of identity tied to experiences as creators, and details of any personal games the participant wished to discuss. This interweaving of questions focused on the self, process, games and audience aimed to make space for complex and potentially contradictory relationships with personal experiences and game design to emerge.

Personal creative experiences are, by their nature, personal; as this study is interested in the creators' experiences and perceptions, participants were not provided with strict definitions for areas of interest (such as 'game', 'narrative', 'personal' or 'mechanics', for example). Instead, participants were encouraged to describe their experiences using their own terms, and their personal standpoint on these terms was investigated through the discussion around them. Each interview began by establishing the creator's history with games and their initial forays into creating them, before moving on to open discussions around their particular areas of interest.[169] Topics included the nature of their games, creation processes, perceptions of player presence and overall experiences making and sharing personal games. Top level prompt questions such as "Would you say you create for yourself or for players?" or "Who do you think the player is, in your games?" allowed participants to reflect on their works after the fact.

168 This option was included as part of the full ethical approval for the interviews, and participants were able to use any pseudonym they preferred if they did not wish to be anonymous.

169 The semi-structured interview schedule is provided in appendix 2.

5.1.2 Participants

Participants for the interviews were selected across a range of social and creative backgrounds, gender identities and locations—they were, however, predominantly western creators. Outreach to non-western creators was limited by my own language constraints, the difficulty of negotiating time zones for interviews, and the nature of my pre-existing community networks. Around half the participants were approached directly to request an interview, due to their published and publicly acknowledged "personal" games. The remaining participants were recruited through an online call for interested parties, shared publicly on twitter and in some private game design discords.

Participants needed to fit only the self-selecting criteria of "personal vignette creator"—though potential candidates were filtered to exclude those who had offered example games falling definitively outside the broad category of "vignette" (such as long-form narrative RPGs). While it would be impossible to include enough creators to comprehensively cover what is a broad and nebulous creative space, the creators interviewed here have been selected to try and cover a range of perspectives, practices and personal connections to the personal vignette game form.

Participants' levels of active involvement with the games development were also varied, ranging from full-time professional game developers and designers, 'hobbyist' and informal creators, interactive artists, and at least one participant no longer involved with game creation of any kind at the time of the interview. Some of those interviewed have been instrumental in bringing the vignette game as a concept to wider attentions—creators such as Nina Freeman who is often cited as the first to use the term (see Chapter 2.1.2) and speaks often about the vignette game form, or Jenny Jiao Hsia whose personal works featured in the V&A *DESIGN, DISRUPT, PLAY* exhibition (see Chapter 2.1.3). Some have created works previously examined through my close reading study, or mentioned in the contextual chapter of this thesis. I have presented my own personal works alongside some of those interviewed here.[170] A few, due to my own involvement in DIY game creation and curation, I am lucky enough to consider as good friends.

To allow for better context to the findings from the interviews, each participant has been listed here alongside a handful of their personal games works [Table 1. Authors and Games]. Directions to where these games can be found and played are included in Appendix 3.

170 Some of my own game zines have featured in Emilie Reed's zine library curation, for example.

Table 1: Authors and Games discussed

Name	Games Discussed
Emilie Reed	*Roadtrip*, *dead wife game*, *oh no*, & others
Jennifer Raye	*Boa Retina*, *Imperishable Memories*, *I Locked Myself In My Room For Three Weeks And Just Looked At Anime Smut Online*
Nina Freeman	*Cibele*, *Ladylike*, *We Met In May*, & others
Becky Leigh	*A little birdy* & others
Sam	*Iapetus*, *Night Drive*
Rose	*Fill The World With Your Rainbow*, *My Name Is Rose*
Jenny Jiao Hsia	*Consume Me*, *and i made sure to hold your head sideways*, *chat with me* & others
Cel Davison	*i've been late*, *Friary Road*, *No Longer Home*
Vaida	*Where the punks at* & others
Marie Claire LeBlanc Flanagan	*Other Hands*, *undertow*, & others
Florencia Rumpel Rodriguez	*Doom Fetito*, *Like Civilized People*, & others
Alex Camilleri	*Memoir en Code: Reissue*
Hannah Rose	*Small Talk*, *Personal Space*
Becca	*Tutorial: Get Chunks, Talk to Your Friend The Bird*
Amy	*Mushrooms red as meat*, *Four Corners*
Lisa Janssens	*Reason*

5.1.3 Thematic analysis process

After transcribing the interviews and familiarising myself with the data, I conducted a reflexive thematic analysis to identify and interpret themes across the interviews; this choice of method has been discussed in more depth in Chapter 3.2. The analysis of the data was iterative, with each developed set of codes and themes then applied to the dataset as a whole, to examine the overall fit. Due to the interpretive nature of the analysis, and the required knowledge base of personal vignette games/DIY game spaces needed for richer insight, this reflexive approach is not concerned with inter-rater reliability.[171]

During the first stages of the analysis, codes capturing both semantic content (i.e. the participants' literal spoken words) and latent concepts (i.e. participants' assumptions underlying the semantic content) were developed. Multiple revisions gradually shifted the

171 Janice M Morse, ""Perfectly Healthy, but Dead": The Myth of Inter-Rater Reliability", *Qualitative Health Research 7*, No. 4 (1997): 445-447.

coding from broad codes such as “low expectations” and person-specific codes such as “friendly [local] game group” toward more descriptive conceptual codes, such as “supportive creative communities”.

In later iterations of the coding process, the initial codes were grouped into more complex connected themes, e.g. “access to safer creation spaces”, and regrouped to explore potential alternative connections. In the final stages, the provisional themes were applied to the coded data set for final fit and adjustments. The thematic analysis produced 67 codes in total, which led to 7 provisional themes, and 5 final themes. The 5 final themes, discussed in section 5.2, were used to shape the three approaches to personal vignette game creation I present in section 5.3.

5.2 Interview themes

The final set of themes achieved through my thematic analysis highlight 5 main motivations and methods behind the creators’ shared experiences with personal vignette games. These broadly fell into the areas of *facilitated game creation*, *playing with form*, *challenging perceptions and making statements*, *managed terms of engagement*, and *seeing and being seen*. These themes are discussed here alongside selected illustrative quotes from creators, to highlight the specifics of how the creators talked about their experiences. It should be noted that each of these themes has elements of both creative motivation *and* method; as such the 5 themes are not discrete or mutually exclusive categories. Indeed some overlap can be found between the themes, where one motivation or method is shaped by elements of another.

5.2.1 Facilitated Game Creation

The first theme centres on the literal act of making, and the ways in which the technical or creative process can be eased into something manageable, approachable, or fun to do. This theme often arose in conjunction with discussion about the overwhelming scale of commercial videogame creation, and the desire to create through more DIY or craft-like approaches. The theme encompasses how the barriers around knowledge, cost, ideas or community can be reduced, making the process of creating personal vignette games more supportive to potential and practicing creators.

Paths around prohibitive factors of game creation were frequently discussed, such as avoiding high cost of tools and equipment, or bypassing assumed levels of technical knowledge. Creators referred to having to navigate around these barriers by using free design tools and self publishing platforms, as well as by joining or creating groups to share resources and

knowledge. The time cost of game creation was also identified as a potential hindrance, with supportive tools and rapid results highlighted as beneficial to joyful creation. Free, simplified online tools such as *Bitsy*, *Twine,* and *Flickgame* were frequently mentioned as facilitated gateways into creation, and their use overlapped heavily with the desire for positive constraints to spark creative ideas:

> I specifically chose bitsy because I felt like I needed to limit myself to get anything done. Trying to make a Unity game for instance, there's like an infinite number of things you can do, you know? Well, I guess that's true of anything but you know what I mean? There's too many choices and I was getting tangled up in them. (Becca)

Tangible barriers such as expensive design software or lack of training were presented alongside more conceptual barriers, such as the availability of safer spaces to create. Community support featured heavily here, with some game jams, discord servers and local minority-focused courses or events being named as spaces supporting new and unconventional game creators. These spaces were praised for providing community support, facilitating the exchange of information or ideas, and encouraging new connections between creators. Many of these spaces were formed from a social rather than a work focused perspective:

> I have a group chat with some friends, and usually that's the first place where my games get shared. We all share our games with each other, because we all make things in the chat. So it's always like 'Hey I did this thing. What do you think? If you find any bugs let me know!'. And we give each other feedback, it's really nice. (Rumpel)

Local, friendship-based, minority-focused or DIY-focused spaces were most often mentioned as a welcome contrast to prior experiences of community gatekeeping and creative isolation within the larger games and creative industry.[172] Many of the participants also praised the low pressure environments these spaces fostered, as well as their casual approach to staying on-topic with regards to games, and their lack of rigid schedules for activities. Difficulties avoiding aggressively commercial expectations for creators when venturing outside of these smaller community groups was another common topic of discussion.

> To actually have it validated that you can make small games in lots of different tools for no purpose beyond just, you like making them rather than "what's your end goal?

172 These discussions were not all positive, however, as the communities do not exist in isolation: see 5.2.4 for the concerns which were raised alongside the praise.

> What's your commercial angle? How is this going to make any money?". It was really nice to be in that kind of that community (Becky)

The desire for lowered barriers also presented with regard to audience engagement. In a number of cases there were concerns from creators about who would be able to play their games, and how. These discussions involved concerns about players' access to equipment (such as PCs or smartphones), as well as their ability to use it (such as how familiar they would be with controllers), and desires to avoid assuming "game literacy" in potential players. Cost concerns also featured, and the open digital marketplace *itch.io* saw multiple (positive) mentions, and the majority of the games discussed were published for free, or with a 'pay what you want' option. In a number of cases, lowering barriers for the creator and the audience presented a chance to engage in creativity in an approachable manner, where other creative pursuits did not:

> Games were a way of bypassing that real [*monetary and access*] restriction that's on [*installation*] artwork, and also of making it much more accessible. Because it's not then in a gallery for two weeks. It's on the internet for as long as until some update decides that nothing is gonna work anymore, which is longer than at least two weeks. (Amy)

5.2.2 Playing with form

Where barriers to the technology, creativity or knowledge required to create games were lowered or removed, so too were rigid ideas of best practice when it came to making games. When discussing the creation of their works, many participants talked about trying not to be overly burdened by planning, design or specific measurable intents. Conversation instead focused on making things in the moment, changing directions as they created, and feeling out the shape of a game as they made it. Most of the motivations behind making were strongly linked to a freeform, exploratory kind of creativity, where games were created impulsively without much upfront design:

> I'll have 10 ideas that I start sketching out, and I'll look at them and then think "this one's the best!". I think I don't spend a lot of time on that part, and it's just the first couple of things that come to mind. (Jenny)

Form and interaction were a primary focus of this experimental nature of creation. Poetic interactions and unexpected behaviours were favoured, with creators' games often featuring unclear or missing endings. There was little concern from most participants about mistakes or

imperfections. Instead, most treated their games as messy experimental spaces, or simply hoped for audiences being able to find their own meaning in creative attempts that didn't go to plan: "a mistake to me might be some really cool artistic choice to someone else" (Jennifer). Creators also spoke of a playfully manipulating game spaces, player perspectives and senses of tim in ways they only noticed after the fact, initially finding what felt right by intuition:

> I wasn't thinking about it when I was making [*i've been late*], but I think I was playing around with the idea of being a ghost and like drifting through these places, how the time blurs in memory. (Cel)

Traditional dramatic narrative tensions feature very little, in favour of static or abstract emotional landscapes/snapshots which less direct relation to events happening at specific points in time. Many of the games discussed are built round, or feature heavily, brief mundane moments, each dramatically equal to the next—"you can flick through little channels of music, just look at things. It's a game about wasting time" (Hannah).

Whatever focus the games took, player entities within them were a complex issue, which often underwent the same experimental approach as the game spaces. For many creators, the space the player occupied was often a fuzzy or uncertain role, left undefined and unspecific. Many creators, in fact, were both certain the character in their games *was* themself, while simultaneously being certain that it was *not*. Some creators spoke of intentional distancing between the player and the game's author-persona, and most creators mentioned an awareness of needing to balance their games' personal aspects with their own privacy and agency:

> I want to make it clear that this is a personal experience. This is not like a role-playing game. I feel like it's more, sometimes it's someone who's kind of looking around, or sometimes it's just kind of someone who sits back and just observes what's happening, in a very carefully removed way, but while still allowing them to kind of get close up and personal with it.[…] I think I don't want them to be the narrator of the story, but I want them to be able to still kind of put themselves in the shoes of someone. (Vaida)

Many creators spoke of how the context of each moment shaped the games they produced. Much of the insight creators offered around their design choices was, like Cel's comment earlier in this section, retrospective. Led strongly by intuitive or impulsive design methods, creators were often seeking a way to "express an idea" (Jenny) not yet fully conceptualised, consciously or subconsciously trying to emulate ineffable lived experiences:

> I actually never did think about that, it's just one of those things where a lot of people like me specifically are conditioned not to take up space. Not to make things emotionally about you. So I made a game, possibly unconsciously, about taking up space. (Rose)

5.2.3 Challenging perceptions and making statements[173]

Where *playing with form* is a creative exercise undertaken somewhat intuitively, concerned with the practicalities of form and aesthetic, the conceptual idea of what a game is or could be sparked more purposeful, philosophical and political responses from creators. Participants spoke of cultural expectations around how games should present, behave and be played. In defiance of these expectations, they went on to speak of their desires to purposefully push against them and "expand what games are" (Vaida).

Much like *playing with form*, then, this desire stemmed from an interest in seeing games as a malleable and imaginative medium. Unlike the previous theme however, the drive for *challenging perceptions and making statements* does not stem from playful curiosity, but is borne from frustration and gatekeeping within the games industry, and commercial games culture in general. Many creators spoke of personal, political motivations for making games that are outside of expectations, and the desire to publicly challenge what makes a 'real game' was a frequent topic:

> I like the idea of my experiences still being called games, because that's just kind of where a lot of it comes from. And also I like the idea of just changing that definition just a little bit like, you know games can also be like an experience. (Jenn)

This desire to expand public perceptions of games manifested in a variety of ways, such as aiming to translate poetry skills to the format of games—"I wanted to see if I could, and then it worked which was exciting" (Nina)—or the desire to take what they had been told was a game design rule and "twist it around" (Lisa) to see new results. There were shared aims to pass the perceived limits of the form, content, and tools of a game, in order to make something new, whether or not it was well received by others:

> The thing that I would want the player to feel at the end of it would be like "wow, this was different". And I know this can have the connotation of "this was shit", but at the same time, to me it was not important to feel like the players loved the game, the

173 In a previously published paper, I had referred to this theme as "Challenging perceptions of 'games'"; after receiving feedback that the theme name was thematically similar to "Playing with form",thus causing some confusion about which was which, I altered the theme name for clarity.

> players hated the game. It was more like making the player feel like they played something new. (Alex)

The challenges of public perception were not just defiant ones, however, but also came from a hope of supporting other creators on the same journey. Beyond confronting the notion of what makes a game, creators also wanted to provide implicit creative permission to anyone who might be seeking to do the same. A recurring topic was creators having a "moment of realisation", where seeing an unusual game work inspired them to create their own. In fact, many unconnected participants spoke of the works of other creators I interviewed when discussing this moment, indicating the impact of games showcasing unapologetically unusual forms. This moment of creative realisation often then developed into a desire to provide these same permissions to others:

> I see so many people putting themselves down because they're like, oh I can't code or I can't do X, so nobody cares about my games. And I'm like, it doesn't matter who cares about your games, it matters how you feel about them! So I sometimes hope that me putting myself out there makes them feel like they can put themselves out there. (Becky)

Beyond broadening the genres of game and the ways of creating them, there was also some desire to see the *use* of games like their own change. Creators spoke of making games as gifts for friends or partners, as in-jokes to be shared like memes, or as cathartic releases without wider implications:

> I generally try to stay away from serious games because that means that there has to be like a clear solution, and I wanted to leave it more open to interpretation. (Lisa)

5.2.4 Managed Terms of Engagement

With regards to both finished games and the act of game development itself, most creators valued being able to set their own terms of engagement with their audience and their peers. This theme linked very closely with the safer spaces that were discussed in relation to creating games, as much of the concern over audience interactions stemmed from distrust or fear of "typical" games culture. Many creators spoke in terms of carefully curated audiences, and choosing specific small circles of friends, family or interest groups to share their work with. Some worry over overlapping with general games audiences was mentioned, with the concept of a general games audience being "kind of scary sometimes" (Lisa). This was especially true where game content was centred on negative or difficult experiences.

Creators described their efforts to appropriately set expectations through game aesthetics or paratextual elements (such as announcement tweets, *itch.io* game store pages, physical objects/displayed text at event installations, or how they described the game in person). This management of audience expectations extended as far as how the game genre or type was identified. From "interactives" and "vignettes" to "trashgames" and "smol games", careful negotiation of qualifying terms was a noticeable presence. The deliberate *use* or *avoidance* of the term 'game' was a common talking point, the conflict between the two choices (and the implications of both) often occurring not just across the interviews but from a single creator. Participants explained that the unusual format of their games could require some upfront acknowledgement:

> I describe my games as micro games or trash games generally, because I think describing them in that way kind of puts people in the right mindset to accept that, if that makes sense? They are a little bit rough around the edges, they're unpolished. They're made in a short space of time for a short burst of playing and that's what they are. I'm not pretending, I have no illusions otherwise. (Becky)

It may be important to note that this desire to manage audiences did not extend to a desire for full authorial control; most creators acknowledged that they have little desire to explicitly control how their work is interpreted. What many did express an interest in was to see their work earnestly engaged with and not immediately dismissed as *weird*—"as soon as you kind of have any kind of surreal imagery people can and take that stuff a little bit frivolously" (Amy). Goals of *respectful* engagement were the priority here, creators largely holding that any player's interpretation of their work is valid, providing it comes from a place of considerate good faith.

Respectful engagement was not only discussed in terms of engagement with the content of a game; creators also spoke of concerns around how the larger industry and academic games circles interacted with the spaces in which they were most comfortable. The low-pressure spaces discussed previously were often seen as fleeting or unstable; multiple interviewees expressed frustrations at their creative spaces being co-opted by undesired industry or academic attention when a tool or event became more popular. Several participants spoke negatively of the difference in how games were treated once they had been "discovered" by those who viewed them as a tool which could be improved or altered to achieve some higher goal.

There were also frequent discussions around unpleasant experiences of games being played or perceived out of context, without including the communities themselves, especially when it came to games portraying experiences that others may find fault in. Of particular concern were the expectations of representation, where “if you expect a game to be a representative experience it's always going to let someone down” (Emilie). These discussions often centred around the possibility of games being played by audiences who might expect them to be more universal than they presented, but there was a notable concern for personal games being overly critiqued due to lacking the more universal appeal of larger, less personal games. These negative experiences, or the fear of their occurrence, were linked both to unknown audiences, and to game creating peers concerned about how the works reflected on the community as a whole. This concern was raised most often in regards to explicitly queer works, which were often felt to attract more negative attention from both sides:

> I think especially as a queer curator, the tendency for, I don't know how to phrase it, like, harsher critical analysis? It seems like media made by marginalised people is looked at with a much more critical eye, and I think it does need critique, but my worry is how that can be limiting what people then create. (Cel)

5.2.5. Seeing and being seen

Despite the desire to manage the engagement with their works, and the worries or fears surrounding audience reactions, the desire to *see and being seen* through personal vignette games underpinned the majority of the conversations. Featuring significantly as both a motivation and a method of practice, creators desired a way to foster human connection and express themselves intimately through their works. This theme covered a number of vague ideas expressed by creators around their desire to be known, in some way or another, through their work. Also included under this umbrella was their interest in communicating with others through the creation, play and discussion of their games, as well as by community and collaborative creative efforts.

Creators spoke most often of attempting to make artistic statements that aligned with their “emotional landscapes” or ineffable experiences. Game spaces were used as a way to share complicated ideas and sentiments which creators struggled to conceptualise meaningfully through other mediums:

> It was like my mental process of how I was processing those feelings that I hadn't actually been able to put into words, and so I didn't really want to use words. Alright, I

> use words, but you know, I didn't want to just directly describe those feelings. You arrive at that through the gameplay. (Becca)

Though these fragments of self were sometimes formed into purposefully inward-focused reflective experiences, where aspects of “creating a space” or “curating an aesthetic” served as more of an *extension* of the self. This stemmed both from a knowingly self-indulgent “making for myself” motivation—creating to explore the creator’s own interests and desires—and from some core sense of self used to guide the creative process:

> I'd like to hope that I'm sort of funny, and my work is just an extension of that, you know? Like how I want to interact with people. I like making people laugh. So I guess it just feels natural to be like, oh, I'm gonna make something that will also put a smile on someone else's face. (Jenny)

Often these desires sprang from easy access to self as a convenient subject. Several creators mused that beyond their personal vignette games, all their other work (games or otherwise) is also a self-representation of some kind. The reach for a subject to hand often instigated or followed an immediate need to say or make *something*, an urge to create or express something undefined. This need manifested as an instinctual and driven creative process, feeding into the impulsive design practices of making:

> I make my games because I need to. It's not really like for myself or for anyone else, it's like a thing that needs to come out. Like when you're feeling a really intense feeling and you just kind of need that howl or scream, you know or laugh or I don't know, cry. But they need to come out. (Marie)

Creators also discussed *seeing and being seen* as a complex desire that was not necessarily reliant on showing the literal truth of themself to others. Many spoke of the importance of sharing how they felt or thought, but were not overly concerned with being specific or truthful; though the works were undoubtedly personal, there was little interest in them being factually, literally autobiographical. The complicated or contradictory versions of the creators as shown by their games offer a different kind of honesty instead, where parts of the game may be simultaneously inaccurate and yet more telling:

> on the radio where there's the equalizer going up and down, and it says "we live in a studio apartment, and there's a constant stream of noise coming from cars and buses outside" technically to myself, it's actually not that bad. To me it's quite normal because

> [...] when I used to live in Hong Kong, there's just noise everywhere. So to me this was actually quite normal. But there's a thing I wanted to say about kind of getting used to things, and I thought that, oh, that was probably a pretty good thing to add in. (Sam)

Due to the highly personal nature of the work, some games were spoken of only in vague terms, as their content had ended up more uncomfortable for creators to re-engage with than they had imagined. Some others were not so much uncomfortable as simply no longer recognisable by the creator as a version of themself. All of these games, however, were recognised by their creators as having helped them recognise or work through something about themself, whether their perception of the games changed later or not. *Seeing and being seen* presented not only as an external desire, then, but an internal and introspective one too.

5.3 Approaches of personal vignette creation

From the themes within the creator interview data, it becomes apparent that the personal vignette game as a creative experience is a complex and often contradictory one, with the creator's own personal circumstances heavily influencing the way their games are made. What is also noticeable, however, are shared conceptual approaches to the act of personal vignette game creation which unite these individual practices.

This discussion, then, considers the interview findings through three facets of the game design process (design *through* restriction, design *as* playful creativity, and design *for* self-expression) within the shared design approaches to *engage on their own terms* which appears within each of the three desires. From the careful selection of community and audience, down to the decisions over whether to publish or not, through to when to call a game "a game"—the creation of personal vignette games is full of intimately personal decisions.

Reflective approaches to game design consider the possibilities of game design as an ongoing dialogue with the self,[174] and as a practice in which the context of the creator is key to uncovering the tacit knowledge at work.[175] The findings of these interviews argue for additional dialogues along these lines, centring the exploratory methods and creative ethos of

174 Sabine Harrer and Henrik Schoenau-Fog, "Inviting Grief into Games: The Game Design Process as Personal Dialogue", in *DiGRA 2015: Diversity of play: Games – Cultures – Identities*, 2015.

175 Jess Marcotte and Rilla Khaled, "Critical Practices in Game Design", *Game Design Research: An Introduction to Theory & Practice*, 2017: 199–218.

the personal vignette in the context of its communities and creators. The individual practices, politics, personal backgrounds and desires of an individual game creator all influence and shape their personal creative processes.

5.3.1 Game creation through positive restrictions

The analysis highlights potential areas in which creators may bounce off initial attempts to create personal vignette games (or games in general), due to unexpected or frustrating barriers. The theme of *facilitated game creation* outlines a number of stumbling blocks; technical struggles, assumed knowledge, lack of community or poor audience/mentor reception of early works were all noted as prohibitive to unplanned and impulsive creativity. Some constraints, though, acted not as a barrier, but as a buffer to being overwhelmed by the creative process. The frequent praises of limited design tools such as *Twine, Puzzlescript, Bitsy* and *Flickgame*, for example, describe beneficial positive constraints which echo the creative appeal of those tools which Compton coins as "casual creators".[176] These are tools that support creativity as its own purpose, rather than eventual polished outputs and streamlined productivity.

While the discussion of positive constraints as part of *facilitated game creation* may seem counter to the idea of an impulsive and experimental design style, Compton's 'no blank canvas' concept makes a case for the two desires co-existing; the argument is that a *restricted* creative space "scaffolds the user's understanding of the possibility space".[177] Alongside constrained tools, restricted creative spaces offer a similar positive scaffolded experience. Arguments have been made that the structure and focus on development themes found in many game jams aid in fostering creativity,[178] a possibility that is highly reflected in the discussion of game jams throughout these interviews (the monthly "bitsy jam" hosted by the tool's creator, Adam Le Doux, being particularly common).

5.3.2 Game creation as playful creativity

The provision of positive creative restriction is a major component of providing approachable, playful design. Where the initial possibilities are reduced, creative potential can be met, and a focus on *playing with form* and *challenging perceptions and making statements* becomes possible. Much like Anthropy's exploration of games as an extension of subversive zine

176 Kate Compton and Michael Mateas, "Casual Creators", in *ICCC*, 2015: 228–35.

177 Compton and Mateas.

178 Ryan Locke et al., "The Game Jam Movement: Disruption, Performance and Artwork", in *2015 Workshop on Game Jams, Hackathons and Game Creation Events (Co-located with FDG-2015)*, 2015.

culture,[179] personal vignette creators represent part of a larger radical games community encouraging exchange, destabilising the perceived conventions of creation, and reimagining the potential of the medium. The exploratory, intuitive motivations position the act of making as part of the play—an autotelic creativity driven by experimentation, experience and playfulness. Emerging from these motivations is an extension of personal and communal identity, built around playful creativity.

The drive for radical, playful creativity can be seen reflected in the tools emerging around, and perhaps in response to, this autotelic culture. The *electric zine maker*[180] which describes itself as both an 'art toy' and a 'playful piece of freeware', is a bright, loud, messy digital space in which creators can design folded one-page zines for printing. The tool, which promises more "game like" interaction in the future, is heavily animated, colourful and aims to be "sweet, playful, disarming, and explorative". Positively received at a variety of game-centric events and spaces, *electric zine maker* exemplifies the desire to play with tools; to push the boundaries of an object, to focus on the joy of making, and to have the tool of creation be fun to use and explore. The relationship between personal vignettes and the tools used to create them share this ethos. Playful creativity shapes the artefact and the tools in equal measure, and is both a means and an end of the process.

5.3.3 Game creation for self-expression

Supported by the approachable and affordable game design discussed within *facilitated game creation*, and the receptive spaces found through *managed terms of engagement*, making personal vignette games offers a kind of individual creative freedom. The changes in how creators can engage with tools and practices herald a slow shift in perceptions of "value" in games—a drift or push away from a consumerist standpoint, repositioning a game's value in its personal, social and cultural significance instead. Creators spoke mostly of self-focused and practice based needs. The ambivalent stance many creators took on creating simple solutions, or making games to make explicit statements, is reminiscent of the ethos of many queer games cultures and their related studies:

> The forms of identity, desire, intimacy, and disruption that we are drawn to in games are not surface level representations of difference. They do not promise, in uninterrogated terms, to make the cultural landscape of video games a more "diverse" place. Nor do they strive simply for increased representation and inclusion, drawing

179 Anna Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-Outs, Queers, Housewives, and People like You Are Taking Back an Art Form* (Seven Stories Press, 2012).

180 Nathalie Lawhead, *Electric Zine Maker,* 2019, https://alienmelon.itch.io/electric-zine-maker

> marginalized subjects into the existing hegemonies of video games. Instead, they challenge norms.[181]

The focus for personal vignette creators, then, lies not in moulding or co-opting the vignette medium to fit grander scales; instead, it is in producing something authentic of the self, and learning to value the cultural and creative works as they are. There is a careful negotiation of terms and audiences around personal vignettes; an ongoing attempt to make games with unique and personal appeal, without being criticised by an audience for not meeting their expectations. This is especially evident in relation to *managed terms of engagement* (section 5.2.3). The new lexicon of game-types allows for a careful mediation of creator intent and audience assumptions, where the games can exist as they are outside the general ideal of 'a game'. This serves both to express the creator's ideals for the game (seen in terms such as *trashgames*, *altgames* and *smolgames*), as well as to signify some of their complicated relationship with the larger "games scene". The conscious choice to distance themselves from industry terms provides a revealing commentary on the way avant-garde personal vignette games and their creators are received by commercial spaces.

This distance does not present a concern for many creators, as there was little discussion of personal recognition or profit as a motivation for making. More emphasis was placed on *seeing and being seen* by others, or on their works being valued through a lens of their choosing (such as in *managed terms of engagement*). Personal vignette games, then, put aside the idea of the game as a teaching tool, the visionary game design auteur, or the independent game as a masterpiece. Instead, they foster a self-led, self-reflective, playful creativity for their creators. With low barriers to entry and strong buffers to support experimentation and self-expression, they offer a quiet everyday revolution of game creation being re-envisioned, repurposed and reclaimed.

5.4 Discussion

This chapter shows that personal vignette games, from the perspectives of their creators, are creative tools for the self as much as they are games created for others. This study explore two of my sub-questions, primarily *what are the authors' connections to the personal vignette game,* and secondarily *what is the significance of personal creative process*. As discussed by the creators interviewed in this study, personal vignette games' complex, poetic portrayal of the self are not only expressive tools for players to share ineffable experiences, but also a defiant,

181 Bonnie Ruberg et al., "-Queerness and Video Games Not Gay as in Happy: Queer Resistance and Video Games (Introduction)", *Game Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018).

flexible, supportive and approachable statement of identity, creativity and purpose. In asking *what are the authors' connections to the personal vignette game,* I find that personal vignette games are redefining the creative possibilities of games for their creators, expanding the ways in which they can speak to audiences, and the ways in which their personal experiences can be explored through play.

As explored in sections 5.2 of this chapter, the proliferation of personal vignette games within safer creation spaces, as well as the frequent use of free tools and DIY-style resource exchanges, reinforces existing arguments for creating more spaces in which people can playfully engage with their own personal dialogue through play. This may require the continued shift to expand what the "videogame" as a form permits—an important aspect of the disruptive design ideals identified in section 5.2.2. In particular, as I discuss from the player perspective in Chapter 4, there is an argument to be made for expanding our notion of personal experiences in games beyond profound and teachable moments, and into brief and playful snapshots.

The interviews examined here also make an argument for the inherent value of smallness in personal games as a design approach, as a creative focus, and as an expectation of play. This chapter illuminates the value of small moments of human connection, shared for their own sake, celebrating the mundane and personally meaningful for creators as much as for players. Through sharing games in ways that are significant but comfortable for their authors, personal vignette games give space for connections between author and player (such as Chapter 4's player positioning), but are not predicated on the need to align author and player into one share sense of purpose.

The experiences of personal vignette creators such as the ones examined within this chapter suggest the need for deeper investigation into experimental, transgressive and personal stories from a process-first perspective—exploring vignette dynamics as emergent and context-shaped elements of design. The personal vignette game shifts the creative power of the videogame into new hands by rejecting technical complexity, audience pressures and commercial expectations, favouring instead a self-driven and expressive form of personal creativity. From casual creators and self publishing, to game jams and gift exchanges, personal vignette game creators benefit from smaller spaces, ones which encourage creativity while reducing the overwhelming vastness of potential. There is much potential for further investigation of creative tools and spaces built around these notions of approachability,

community and imperfection; this study also highlights the need for greater efforts toward creative *inclusion* of creators over in-game *representation* aiming to portray their experiences.

Personal vignette games creators, then, are offering up sincere, inventive, honest games; playful statements of self which are “reaching out to touch” (Marie) their players through mediated game spaces. They speak to the value of human connection, of connecting with others through the mediums that allow us to express ourselves playfully and meaningfully. They remind us that to hear clearly, we must be open to novel ways of speaking; and perhaps most importantly, that we must provide the tools to amplify those pushed to the margins of our craft.

6. *rough edges*: the practice of personal vignette games

> Look, you're a complicated person and so am I. There's no way to tell the whole story of a person in a single short game.[182]

In the previous chapter, I established the importance of the *act of making* to personal vignette game creators; to make personal or political statements, to find connections with others and the self, or simply to find joy in creativity. In this chapter, I inform these insights with a practice-based study, investigating the creative process of personal vignette games *as it occurs*. This study, then, centres the experience of making personal vignette games, from conceptualisation and craft through to publication and play. To do so, I created 3 publicly released personal vignette games, released collectively as the online micro-exhibition *rough edges*. This practice examines my process of creation as an approach to understanding personal vignette games from within, and considers its influence on both the games and myself as the creator.

Through this study, I approach the thesis research question *how are creators using vignette games to explore personal experiences* primarily through the sub-question *what is the significance of personal creative process*; the act of creation itself is the focal point of the study. My own creative practice was examined in progress and post-creation from two perspectives. The first perspective looks at the creative act through the specific practicalities of making, and how tools/time/technical elements shape and affect the personal content of the game. The second perspective looks at the creative act through its intangible effects on the creator. Through these perspectives, I explore the research question by examining the influences of practice on the perception/presentation of self through personal vignette games.

In the study of videogame design, the act of making is frequently explored, but infrequently treated more than a procedure or framework to breakdown and perfect. Game creation is often seen through the lenses of intended audiences, their needs and satisfactions; of principles and frameworks of design, about rules and forms, and the components that make a game "a game". I argue through this practice and reflection that it is the *way* in which creators can, and do, make these games that allows them to explore and express themselves artistically through them. I also argue against game design as an inherently structured experience, working toward a specific purpose with an audience's reception in mind. Although the

182 Lizzie Stark, "Designing Autobiographical Games", *Leaving Mundania* (blog), 30 March, 2015, https://leavingmundania.com/2015/03/30/designing-autobiographical-games/.

existence of a potential audience who will play the games has influences on the creative process, and I touch on this at times (most significantly in section 6.3.3), my critical reflection focuses more closely on the act of creating and on the experience of the author. These arguments focus primarily on the ways in which an abstract and poetic sense of self in the games is tied to self-guided, free-form personal practices.

I begin this chapter by first providing an overview of the games which were made for the study. I then explain my creative and documentation processes in section 6.1.1, followed by the processes of critical reflection that took place alongside and after the making in section 6.1.2. I present the insights revealed through the creation of (and reflection on) *rough edges* in two parts, covering both of the perspectives mentioned above.

In section 6.2 I cover emergent knowledge around the purpose behind my practice, and the significance of the ways my personal vignette games are made. Through an examination of my practice as an unstructured, creative freedom, outside of design, I look at honesty in self-representation as it occurs through unplanned avenues. To this end, 6.2.1 considers impulse and improvisation in everyday creativity, 6.2.2 explores the influence of creative circumstance, 6.2.3 similarly examines the influence of the workspace provided by creative tools, and 6.2.4 looks at creative freedom to fail.

In section 6.3 I go on to examine the making and sharing of personal vignette games as a reflective personal dialogue with myself. I look at the self as deconstructed and abstracted for the screen in 6.3.1, discussing how my physicality and ideas of myself shape the version of me I create to share with players. I go on to discuss using the game space and aesthetic as an extension of the self in 6.3.2. I then examine the differences in approaches for public and private creation in 6.3.3, reflecting on the complex relationship between honesty, audience and myself.

I conclude in section 6.4 that the *experience* of creating a personal vignette game is, for me, as much a source of its personal significance as the game's content. This creative practice takes special interest in the constraints, brevity and poetic fragmentation of the vignette form, and how these impact and shape personal vignette games. Through this context, I examine how the performance of the self exists not just as a playable entity or a collection of memorabilia within the digital artefact, but through the whole experience of the creating, playing and sharing the games.

6.1 *rough edges* and the personal practice

The games I created during this study explore body, place, memory and connection through vignettes of my own experiences. Each game plays in under 5 minutes, and requires no particular skill with gameplay. The works together create a patchwork of personal identity, open to others to explore. A line of rough explanation is listed alongside each game on the website exhibit, provided for context here. The games released publicly are as follows:

Habitual

"HABITUAL is a series of micro interactions about a body's small movements and bad habits."

Created in the tool *Flickgame*, *Habitual* is a series of seven diary games, made daily over the course of one week. The games, linked together by a clickable "home screen" self portrait, each examines a different body part and focuses on a related 'bad' habit. The games revolve around a single easy interaction (clicking a certain colour on the screen), which in most cases is loopable. The games use this interaction to explore compulsive behaviour and its impact on the body.

Victual

"VICTUAL is a flatgame about loss and cooking, change and grief. It fiddles a little with the flatgame rules, but it has the spirit."

Created using a variation on the *Flatgame* template, *Victual* is a *Unity* project inspired by Flatgames, and following many (but not all) of the 'rules' of the game jam. It was created over a weekend, hand illustrated with ink pens and water colours, and explores an event from my recent personal history. The game presents a poetic one-sided conversation, shown through text messages, about the connection between food, friendships and loss.

Situal

"SITUAL is a walkie*,[183] a mishmash dream of bits of walks I remember, and how it feels to be in a place."

Created using *sok-worlds*, *Situal* is a walking simulator (or "walkie") about fragmented memories of various walks. The game is created by collaging stock images to recreate idealised landscapes and cluttered memory-scapes, presenting dioramas around which players can walk. It focuses on the significance of minor details, and provides snippets of text placed next to objects of interest.

183 Footnote on the exhibition website reads "* a walkie is the only *good* name for a walking simulator, which was a perfectly fine name to begin with."

6.1.1 Making and documenting personal vignette games

The creation of the personal vignette games discussed in this chapter, like the creation of many games like them, actively explores the idea that artistic self-expression through game creation can be an everyday occurrence, requiring no particular preparation or purposeful goal. I began this practice particularly interested in the recurring themes of 'mundane' games that arose in Chapter 5, and the everyday, small inspirations that bring them into being. The frequent use of the personal vignette as daily documentation, as an interactive in-joke or a vehicle for the regular minutia of a person's life, for example, all makes the argument for artistic creation of games under everyday circumstances, for personal satisfactions. My own process, while aiming to use as un-staged a method of creation as possible,[184] looked to my previous studies in Chapter 5 for inspiration. Particularly influenced by my interviewees' descriptions of their practices, *rough edges* were made for a variety of purposes—such as documenting daily life, examining recent life events, and participating in a particular game style or community.

My process of game making began by taking self-directed initial focuses, then following design ideas improvisationally as they occurred. The initial areas of interest for each game provided boundaries within which I began creating, directed by my own impulses. These were either conceptual boundaries (such as my relationship to others for *Victual*) or practical ones (such as using a particular tool for *Situal*, or creating a diary over several days for *Habitual*). The path to the final games was one of narrowing and refocusing within these boundaries, explored in more depth in section 6.2. As I created, I followed my own impulses to find more specific focuses, until the key act, aesthetic or conceit of the game became apparent to me. Within the initial constraints, then, finding new boundaries helped to establish aesthetics, tones and moods important to the game.

To document the creative insights and capture the latent knowledge tied to the act of making, I kept a diary during the creation of the games. Over the course of the creative practice, I revisited the games to play, reflect on, and update them. The diary contains drawings and notes for game concepts, doodles to figure out aesthetics, layouts and interactions, and some reflections and conversations with myself during and after the creative process. These notes, however, are not design documents; instead, they are a collection of my usual scattered on-paper workings, providing moment to moment thoughts and ideas across much of my game creation. While they do not comprehensively cover my goals, thoughts, intentions and feelings,

184 That is to say, a method as close to usual creation as was possible while still ensuring the practice could be meaningfully integrated into my academic study; as much as possible I avoided creating in a staged manner purely for the sake of study.

and were not taken from an academic standpoint, they do reflect my own approach to personal vignette game creation, and so have been used to inform the critical reflection in this chapter. Fragments of this design diary are included within this chapter to illustrate elements of the creative process as they are discussed.

6.1.2 Critical reflection on practice and self

The insights discussed in the rest of this chapter come from linking my own practice/reflection/reading with relevant existing theory of creativity, art, and the self. I also explore connections between this study and my previous ones as they arise, to find the common threads that unite personal vignette games as object and identity with the practice that brings them into being. The reflections presented around my practice come in part from my experiences of making, and in part from a post-creation examination of the works and diaries I created (see 6.1.1, above). This post-creation examination included playing the games I had created some time after they were made, to produce short readings of the works as personal texts and statements of self.

What arises from revisiting my experiences of making is an unpicking of the emergent knowledge of making, which highlights how my process shapes the personal vignette games I create. With the addition of playing and reading the works as game texts once completed, the knowledge of self/process is expanded to include observation on the ongoing personal dialogues the games facilitate post-creation.

6.2 The purpose of practice

In this section, I consider personal vignettes as a practice not through the lens of game design *for* a purpose, but game design *as* a purpose—creating to create, for the benefits that lie within the creative process itself. As discussed in Chapter 5.3.2, there is an improvisational and exploratory possibility to personal vignette game creation that holds a notable appeal to creators. As a form, the personal vignette game prioritises an evocative, poetic *feel* over a structured narrative or solvable puzzle (see Chapter 2.2), and can be a forgiving space to create without plan or purpose (see Chapter 5.3.2).

I posit that thoughts and ideas around the self may be investigated, consciously or unconsciously, through this flexible creative approach. In these self-interested motivations for creating, I perceive an approach to game creation that focuses on finding and following primarily that which is interesting to the creator. I argue for the creative benefits of everyday

creativity, games shaped by the contexts in which they are created, and the freedom to produce flawed, imperfect works.

6.2.1 Impetus, improvisation, and everyday inspiration

The act of creating simply to create is, of course, not as simple as it may seem. Though self-direction and improvisation may play a part in the creative process, there must surely be a starting point, a drive or decision that carries the creator forward. With personal vignette game creation, two main avenues into creating personal vignette games were discussed by interviewees in Chapter 5: an interest in a particular tool or event, and a desire to explore something of themself. These starting points show an *impetus to create something*, and the *inspiration* for what to create (that is to say, the self).

From my creative starting point through to the way I focus within the game, the impetus to create and the inspirations that shape game are what guide the creative process as it progresses. Whether I am following the guidance of a game jam (*Victual*), have an interest in trying a game making tool (*Situal*), or wish to keep a diary (*Habitual*), where I begin making has a guiding influence on the overall shape of the game. Across all of the personal vignette games I have created, when I sit down to make a game myself, I find that I reach for a subject matter close at hand, one that I know well. When creating a game to alleviate the boredom of being stuck at home, for instance, it is my own memories of walks I remember fondly which shape the game *Situal*.

Though many personal vignette games present complicated perspectives on human existence, my familiarity with the subject matter, *myself*, allows for an easy transition from 'desire to create' to 'creating'. Neither of these entryways to creating suggest that creating a personal vignette requires a *plan*—in fact minimal planning was a commonly mentioned practice in Chapter 5—or even any ideas of the content in mind before beginning. An impetus to *make something* only needs to carry me as far as opening a notebook, or some game creation tool, and experimenting with what I wish to express.

This first impetus to make, or moment of creative inspiration, then differs from larger scale, commercial game design—in that *design* does not need to be the logical next step. Within the realm of game making, game *design* is often presented, as a counterpart to game *development*, as inevitable; the two parts of the creation process undertaken in tandem are how a game gets made. Influential and still much assigned texts on game design, such as *The Art of Game Design: A book of lenses*[185] and *Rules of Play, Game Design Fundamentals* present "games as

185 Jesse Schell, *The Art of Game Design: A book of lenses* (CRC press, 2008).

designed systems"[186]. Frank Lantz' comparison of games as "operas made out of bridges"[187] neatly encapsulates this common perception: that games are structurally designed for specific functional, aesthetic and emotional purposes, a mix of architecture and composition. When I begin creating my personal vignette games, however, my desire to create leads directly into creating; the end goals and the ways in which I arrive at them unfold as a part of the creation process. There are no systems which must be balanced and compatible, no narrative beats to plot, no bridges to design.

Instead of an end goal to design for, this impetus or inspiration to make something becomes the guiding boundary of my games, an initial conceptual limit within which I can create. Within my own practice, a process shared across the development of the games was one of identifying simple boundaries (such as *my body* in *Habitual* or *my relationships* in *Victual*) to mark out a conceptual area within which I wanted to create. I then explored within those boundaries as I created, asking myself what aspects of the initial boundary were interesting to me, or sketching out images related to it until something stood out. Through this creative exploration, I was able to identify and establish new focus as the games progressed, according to my evolving interests.

As I considered what about my week I was interested in documenting for *Habitual*, for example, I initially began by noting little moments of my day onto post-it notes, which I collected together and doodled around [Figure 29]. These notes led my focus first to the *physicality* of inhabiting a body as I began drawing isolated body parts as potential ideas for game screens. This then shifted into the *inconvenient* parts of my physicality as I drew parts of my body with the cuts and nicks I saw on them at the time [Figure 30]. Finally, I narrowed the focus to the impulsive, thoughtless bad habits of a body left to its own devices, as I found myself twitching my legs or my free hand chipping nail varnish off my nails without me noticing.

186 Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of play: Game design fundamentals* (United Kingdom: MIT press, 2004).

187 Frank Lantz, "Hearts and Minds" (Presentation, Game Developers Conference - Design track, San Fransisco, March, 2014).

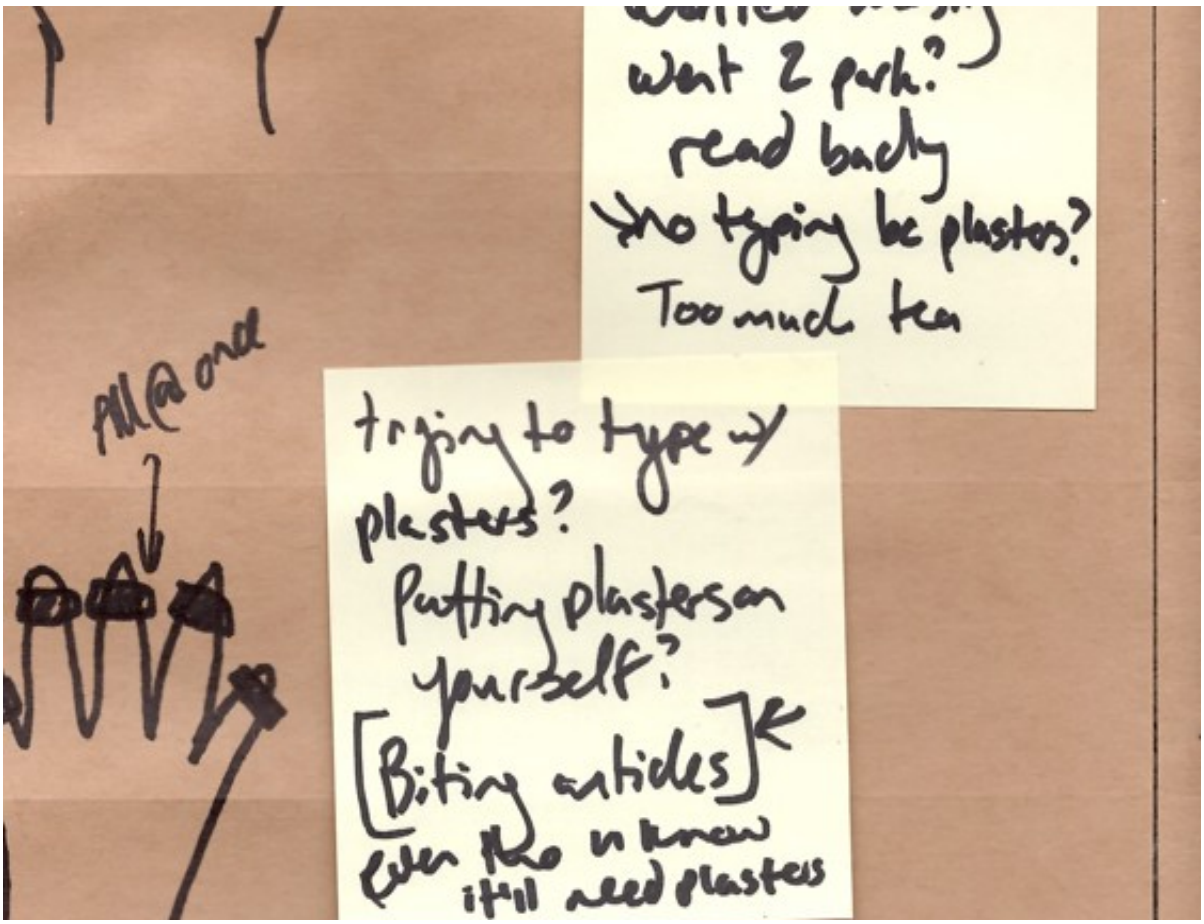


Figure 29: A scan from my design diary showing post-its which mention I have been chewing my cuticles again and am finding it hard to type with plaster on my fingertips.

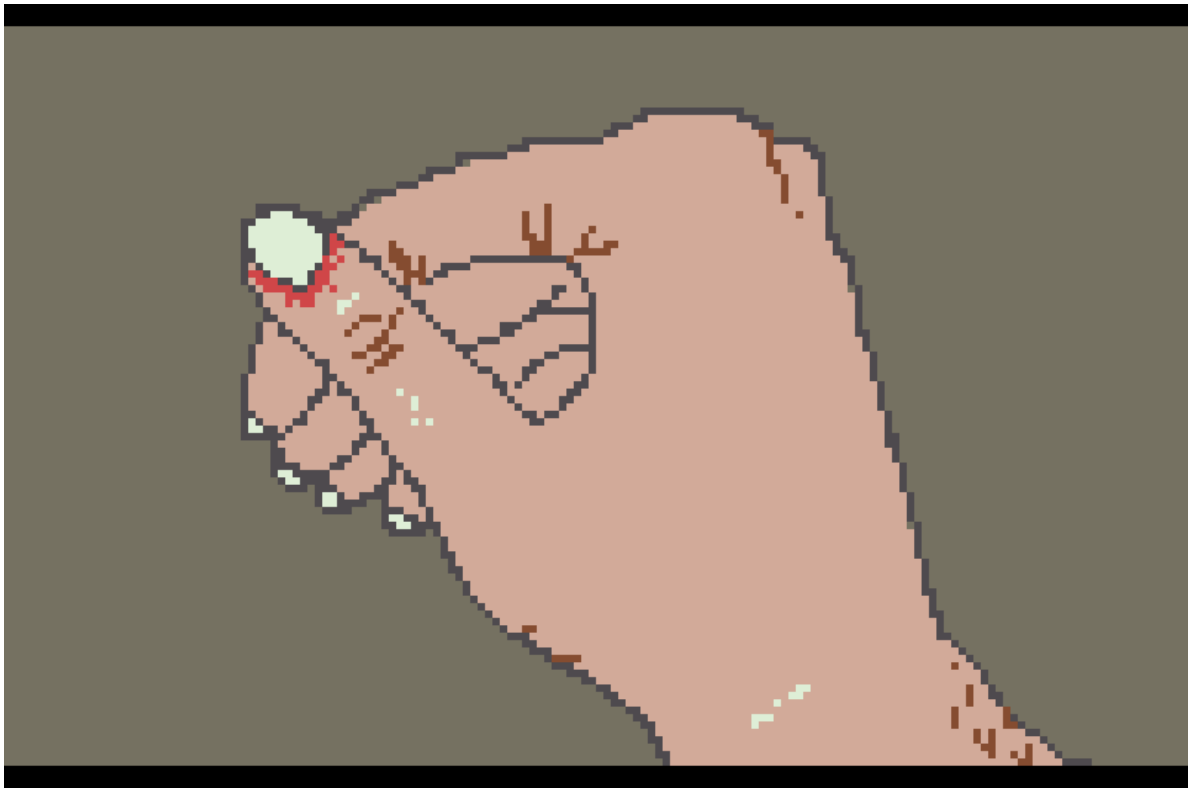


Figure 30: A screenshot of one of the scenes in "Habitual", a single hand is shown with blood around the nail of the thumb and scars on the thumb and wrist.

Though little of my body is remarkable in any memorable narrative sense, the depth of personal exploration and perspective offered in each vignette reframed my existence as something meaningful to me. Though no grand creative breakthrough arose from the game, I found myself hoping that perhaps others could relate to its mundanity. During a week of high stress and low impulse control, these bad habits—unnoticed until my desire to document myself—became apparent and interesting to me as I created snapshots of myself.

6.2.2 Games of circumstance

When considering a "finished" game, regardless of genre, it is plausible to imagine an object that is functional, aesthetically polished, understandable to the player but presenting challenges of dexterity, strategy, puzzle or the like. It is not unreasonable to also conflate "finished" with "the best possible version of itself"—planned and tested, revised and reworked if needed—a game created within the best tools for the job, designed and redesigned to overcome any mishaps or technical limitations.

However, it is the element of *improvisation* mentioned in section 6.2.1 that leads to personal vignette games away from this idealised concept of finished games. Where game design is self-indulgent and impulsive, I argue that freeform creation makes objects of specific circumstance. Shaped by the moments in which I made them, and the day to day shifting of an unplanned or informal practice, my personal vignette games are each significantly shaped by the circumstances in which they are made.

As explored throughout this thesis, the personal vignette game as a form both encourages and excels under restrictions of aesthetic and interaction. With less room for complex systems or graphics, creators may find games kept abstract and brief by the circumstances of their making, as well as the vignette style. The personal vignette game folds the contexts of the creator into the circumstances of the creative process. As discussed in Chapter 5, personal vignette games have been shaped not only by creator intent, but by the tools used to make them, by time, and the external circumstances of creating; as Sontag astutely observes in her essay *Against Interpretation*:

> Usually critics who want to praise a work of art feel compelled to demonstrate that each part is justified, that it could not be other than it is. And every artist, […] remembering the role of chance, fatigue, external distractions, knows what the critic says to be a lie, knows that it could well have been otherwise.[188]

188 Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays*, *1961,* Penguin, 2009: 33.

As a form of game creation forgiving of improvisational and experimental approaches distanced from traditional planned and tested game design, many of the choices I make as I create are shaped by the circumstances of my making. These moment-to-moment decisions may be grounded in my own creative desires at the time, such as beginning and abandoning games for *Habitual* as I found drawing one frame to be satisfying enough. They may also be as practical as featuring only one colour in *Victual* simply due to misplacing my watercolours, resulting in a melancholy aesthetic I had not intended. Though I was capable of recalling very intricate details from past walks, *Situal* is made in a tool the can only portray what is found in stock photos and "cut out" with the mouse; a number of images within it are the best I could do (or was willing to commit doing) with the available tools [Figure 31]. In creating my personal vignettes, I follow the confines and capabilities of tools and free time rather than working toward a preplanned end goal.

Figure 31: A screenshot from "Situal" showing a frog pond; the same image of a frog is repeated several times.

Though the end results are reflective of my experiences, they do not need to be ultimately faithful to the reality of how I look, how I felt, or what happened. Without a complex pre-creation design plan to adhere to, though, I create games as a palimpsest of creative moments,

each new idea piled and layered on top of what came before—a history of my interests and attempts.

6.2.3 The influence of the workspace

Alongside the creative circumstances in which a personal vignette game is made, the digital workspace in which it is created can also be seen reflected in how the game appears and performs. Particularly when working within small scale game creation tools, the specifics of the tools are notable features in the games themselves. These ideas were explored first in Chapter 2.1.2 with the discussion of *sok-stories/sok-world* and Flatgames, and how the workspaces aimed to encourage particular styles and approaches to the games made within them. The reflection of tool upon game occurs again in Chapter 5.2.2, where creators spoke of shaping their games around a tool's capabilities (or specifically pushing past what it was meant to do). Outside of the general purpose game creation environment, tools with particular quirks, intents and aesthetics shape particular kinds of games.[189]

I argue here that it is not only the capabilities of the tool which shape the aesthetics and play of personal vignette games, but also the emotional tone of the workspace, and the ways in which the tools present themselves to users. For instance, in the grassroots, community-developed tools I and others use to create personal vignette games, there is an effort to emphasise and reflect the joy of making through the tool itself. Some of these tools set a tone for the act of creating, in their documentation,[190] their interface[191] or their communities.[192] For example, in the gentle undulation of *sok-stories'* user interface, and the comic sound effects of *sok-worlds* as assets are imported and manipulated, the act of creating is made playful itself. This playful connection to making is a creative choice that may bleed through into the presentation of the games, and shape the tone of the practice. *Sokworlds* was particularly notable for this; not necessarily an "easy" tool to use, but not a complicated one either.

Within my own practice, the more idiosyncratic workspaces affected the authoring of my personal vignette games noticeably, with very varied aesthetics and interactions all portraying equally true-to-me ideas in very different ways. Even the multipurpose workspace of *Unity*, used to create *Victual*, created a game aesthetically recognisable as a Flatgame due to the

189 The genre's of "Bitsy game" and "Flickgames" are good examples of this, being accepted as a kind of game in their own right united in form and presentation by the tool they are made in. Both tools were mentioned frequently by creators interviewed for Chapter 5, though Bitsy was mentioned more frequently.

190 Such as the Twine manual's heavy emphasis on aesthetic and digital storytelling.

191 Such as the wiggling UI and planned "virtual friend" elements of Natalie Lawhead's *Electric Zine Maker:* described on the official website *http://unicornycopia.com/ezm/* as "somewhere between a game and a tool. It's something playful and toy-like!"

192 Such as the bitsy community's official monthly game jam, presented each month on Twitter by the tool's creator Adam Le Doux.

distinctive features of the game jam and the template it provides. In *Habitual*, for example, each scene features only an extreme close up of an isolated body part, sharp around the edges. This comes, in part, from *Flickgame*'s small work screens, pixel art style and limited colour palettes. While it would be possible to create more realistic images in *Flickgame*, I found myself much more interested in using the restrictive space to my advantage; to look at something simple, very closely, in a way that was as messy as the week I was documenting. The nature of the tool facilitated an easy and stylistic creation, helping me explore an idea through a specific lens— whether or not it was the one I would have intended if I had planned the game in advance. I find strong similarities, here, to the circumstances of creation discussed above in 6.2.2, in that the moment and the workspace have just as much impact as my plans. While the games are not necessarily made with a the best tool for the job,[193] the workspace has its say in what the job can and should be.

For my game made in sok-world, though actions are imprecise, and clean artwork almost impossible to achieve, the pleasing *squeak-squeak* sound effect accompanying my image editing both kept me at my task, and led to *Situal* being a much more jovial game than the others created for *rough edges*. The game I made with the tool was more lighthearted and curious as I found myself reflecting the environment I made it in, and actively enjoying the process of creating. These exploratory/enjoyment focused workspaces are reminiscent of Compton's work defining *casual creators*, interactive tools which encourage "fast, confident, and pleasurable exploration of a possibility space"[194] rather than productivity-focused creation. Although they do not share the generative capabilities and instant feedback which Compton emphasises for casual creators, workspaces such as *Flickgame* or *sokworlds* do provide spaces which facilitate quick and pleasurable creation, limiting actions to avoid overwhelming potential, and to encourage creative exploration. Where these tools lend themselves to the creation of *personal* vignette games in my practice, is in the characteristic, idiosyncratic way the tools present themselves; I find a personal emotional response to the *character* of the tool, prompting reflection on particular aspects of myself. This relationship between myself and the tool is reflected in the work we create together.

In some cases, the limitations of workspaces may bleed not only into the aesthetics or interactions of a game, but may also ascribe the possible options for the on-screen presence of the creator. That is to say, the workspace itself may steer the way players are positioned in the space. In *Situal* for example, it was the lack of any way to link a character or physical body to

193 "Best" of course is a subjective term, and high technical specifications do not inherently imply a tool is better than any other alternative.

194 Kate Compton and Michael Mateas, 'Casual Creators.', ICC 2015, 228–35.

the player-operated game camera that led to a game featuring only my memories, and not my body. The unalterable default for *sok-world*'s games however is an *implied* presence—players manifest in the space through audio effects for footsteps, and a game camera attached at what I can assume to be head height. This body without specifics seemed best suited to aspects of myself where no *particular* body was required, then. Particularly due to the static nature of *sok-world*'s (lack of) in-game interactions, the ideas I then considered for games that seemed most worthwhile to me were those that positioned a player as witness to the environment around them, where my own experiences could be *shown* through that environment. The tool itself led me to the combination of presenting a personal landscape while allowing players to enjoy the implied physicality of their body: hence, for me, a game about walking.

That is not to say the literal or conceptual boundaries of a tool cannot be crossed if the personal experience demands it, however. Much like the creator discussion of *playing with form* in Chapter 5.2.2, I contemplated games which strayed from the usual uses of tools as I considered the unusual parts of myself and my experiences. I began and discarded a companion game to *Habitual* created in *sok-worlds*, a montage of bruised knees and bitten fingers arrayed around a landscape the player could walk through, as a body within a body. At the time, however, I was finding it difficult to look at realistic images of injury—and so the circumstances of making it redirected the focus of my game.

6.2.4 Flaws, failure and freedom to discard

Outside of formalised design practices, and free of the trappings of product appeal or perfection, game creation may be approached with a certain creative recklessness, then. Game creation as improvised, led by circumstances, allows creators to treat the games themselves as disposable objects. In purposefully abandoning the notion of "professionalism" for creative artifacts, the act of creating in an anti-designerly fashion becomes an act of self-expression itself. By sharing that which I know to be unfinished or imperfect, I assert that my games do not have to be polished objects to exist, to be played, to be valued. There is a freedom in actively and knowingly making a mess, unconcerned with the impact this will have on the game or an imagined audience.

Some of the mess of my creation, however, remains precisely because of its potential impact on an imagined audience. With on-screen glimpses into the creative process visible, I find that my games can be connected to me, the creator (and a human). In the game *Victual*, for example, a number of the original line drawings which were later inked over are left on display [Figure 32]. Though my initial sketches could have been removed digitally after the

images were scanned in, once they appeared in the game I found that I preferred to see them there. The presence of my line art confirmed, in some way, that the *act* of making the game had happened—that it began from something (more) rough and imperfect than the final artwork. Similarly, the imagery of *Habitual* is a fairly crude attempt at a human body, but while more realistic art is possible within Flickgame, I found I had little desire to make it. The messy version of myself I presented was a more honest representation of my artistic skills, of my own body, and perhaps most of all, how little it mattered to me whether the game looked tidy.

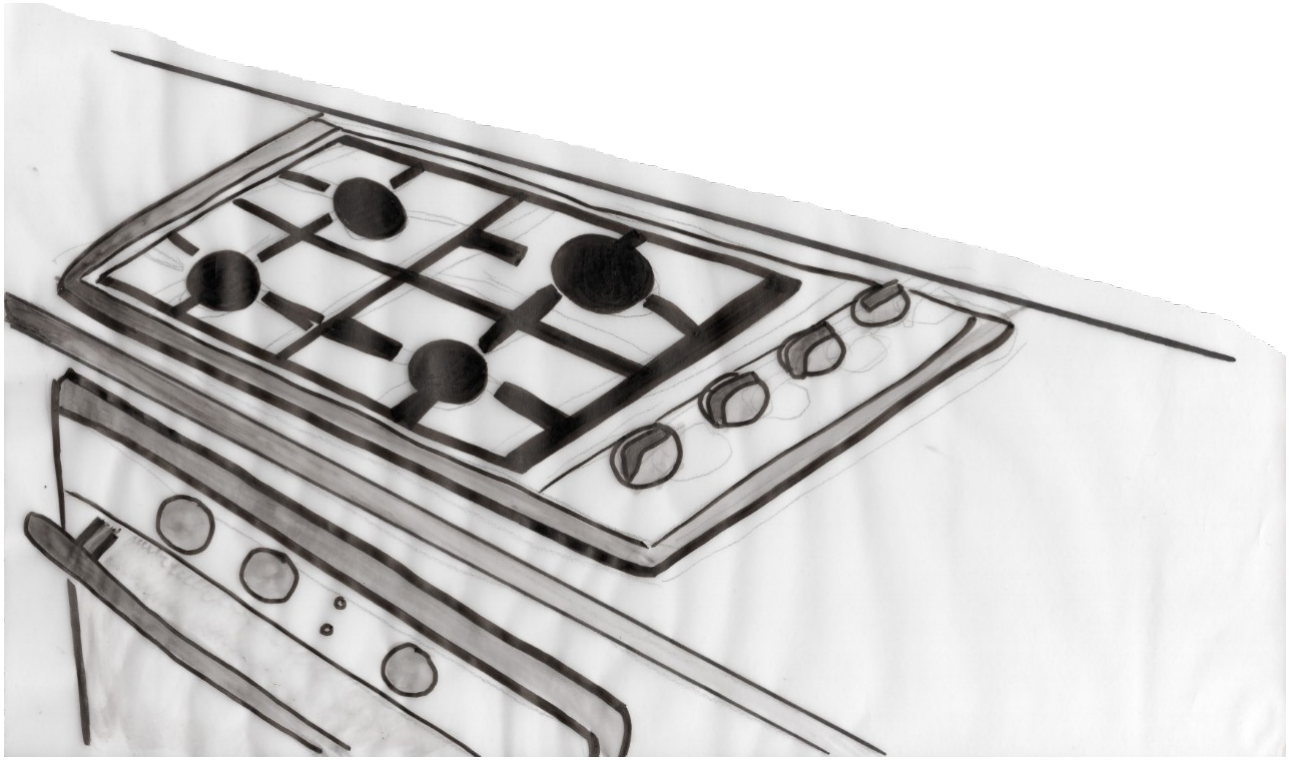


Figure 32: An asset of an oven, hob and worktop from the game "Victual". The original pencil sketch can be seen beneath the ink.

Despite my games being intended for public view, and the general videogame audience consensus that a game's graphics should be "good", the matter of whether a style of drawing was universally *appealing*, or an image I had cut out was *tidy*, is not of concern. In expressing my sense of self through this act of curation/creation/display, I found myself working to my own permissions; to be messy in my creativity, to hide fewer of my 'mistakes'. When the response of an audience barely features in the first place, their imagined disappointments become inconsequential, and I find more room for embracing the existence of failed, unfinished, imperfect objects without fear of criticism. As Halberstam surmises at the end of *The Queer Art of Failure:*

> To live is to fail, to bungle, to disappoint, and ultimately to die; rather than searching for ways around death and disappointment, the queer art of failure involves the

> acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd, the silly, and the hopelessly goofy. Rather than resisting endings and limits, let us instead revel in and cleave to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures.[195]

Approaching game creation as a messy, imperfect, process of creative abandon, then, supported a more honest understanding of myself through my games. This creative honesty, though, extended past the content included within my games, and into my reasons for creating them. A number of additional games, for example, were 'created' for the project only within my head or notebook. These games were simply a set of potential aesthetics and interactions that helped me capture a particular moment or feeling, like the contentment of seeing a pigeon plodding over my office skylight on a particularly trying day [Figure 33]. Some games were abandoned part way through as having lost my interest or achieving what I had aimed for without the need to complete them. An entry into the diary game *Habitual* which portrayed the frustrating experience of trying to find my glasses, was left incomplete after a handful of screen had been drawn [Figure 34]; I realised through recreating what I saw that the frustration came with a unique visual appeal, and that I was perhaps more fond of aspects of how I see than I had realised. Part way through, it felt unfair to include the game in *Habitual* alongside my self-confessed bad habits. In these cases, beholden to no particular audience, I walked away from the games confident that they were capturing my experiences meaningfully for me, unfinished but still evocative and poetic.

195 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011): 187.

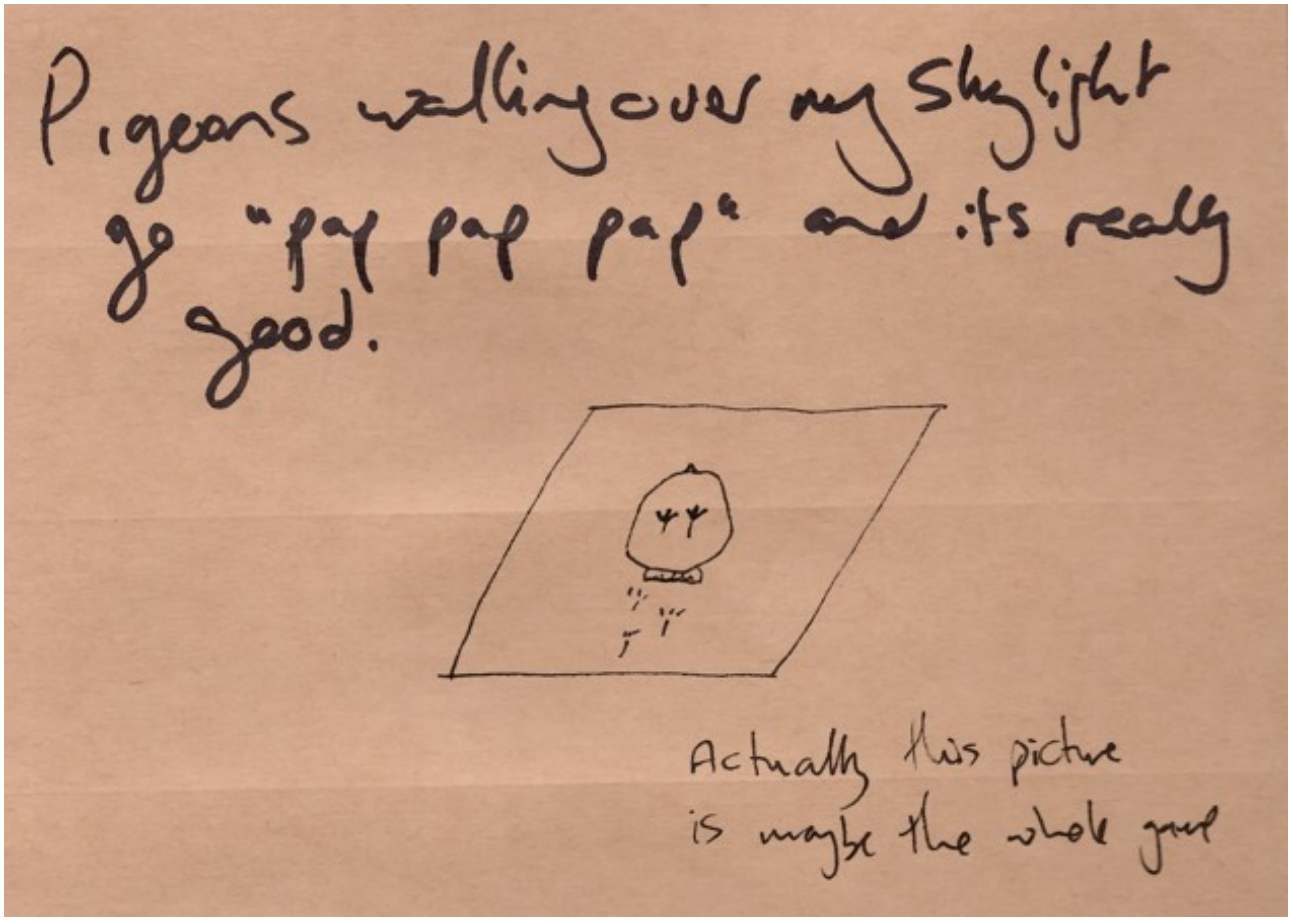


Figure 33: A scan of my design diary, showing a sketch of an unmade game about watching a pigeon on a skylight.

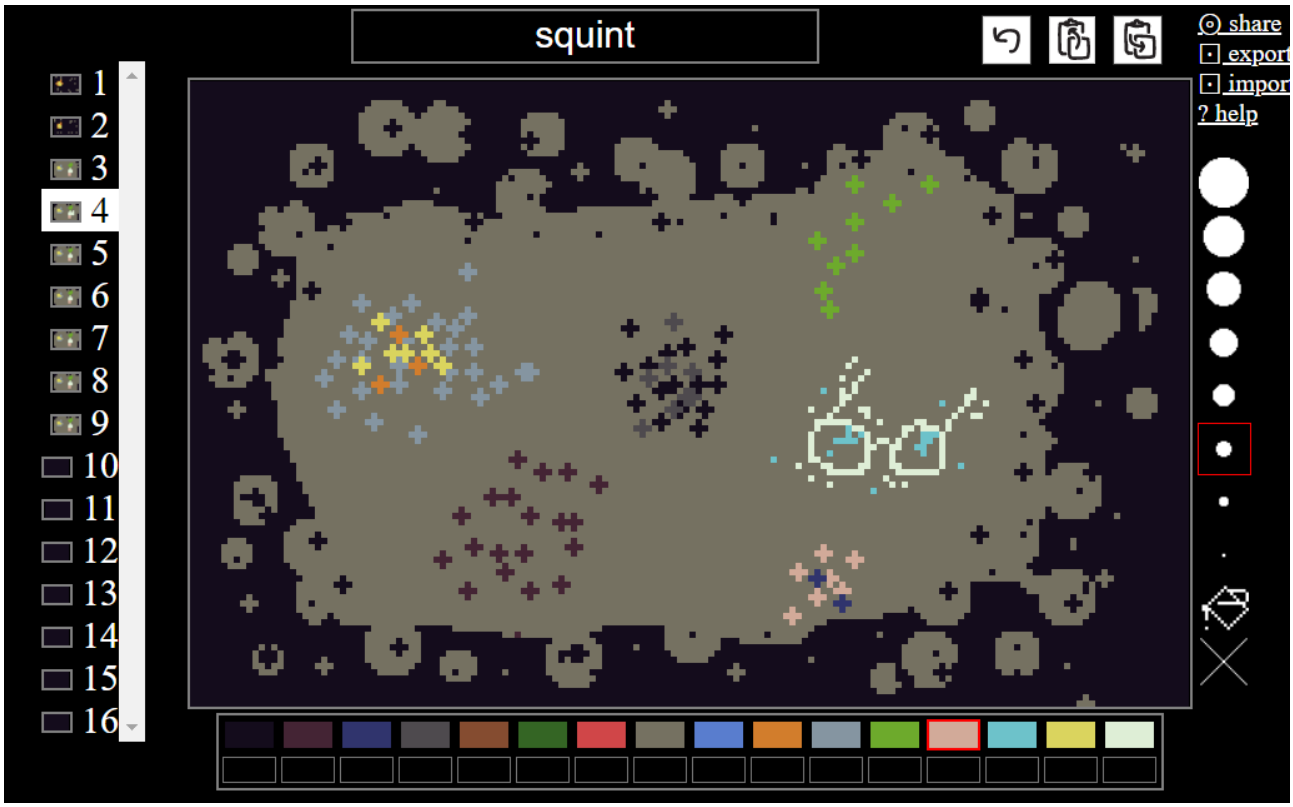


Figure 34: A screenshot of the Flickgame workspace, showing an in-progress game for "Habitual" about poor vision, which was abandoned at the state shown.

The personal vignette game muddies the waters of videogames as a medium which must always strive for beauty, or clever solutions, or technical brilliance, to stand out. With less focus on the output, I feel freer in the option to simply leave behind anything that does not interest me. In creating personal, messy, even potentially *disappointing* games, I find a freedom to create in a way that reflects myself honestly and joyfully; a particularly poignant practice for a medium still fixated on its polish, on the ability to win, to solve, to come out on top.

6.3 Personal dialogue through making and sharing

The making of a personal vignette game asks creators, by its very nature, to actively and knowingly share something of who they are through their games (see Chapter 2.1.2). While it is arguable that all creative acts leave artefacts of the self within them, choosing purposefully to create my own image or experiences asks me to, consciously or subconsciously, decide what version of myself will reside within the work.

The creation of personal vignette games, then, presents some conceptual difficulties when it comes to the ambiguous delineation of author and player. While I may desire to be *seen* through my games (see Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.2.5), I must also work around how much I want to be *known*, how much of the game is private to me, and in what way I wish to be perceived. Though there is value to making purely to create something, there is also an element of self-reflection required when creating personal vignette games. The *personal* requirements of personal vignette games allow creators to explore perspectives and possibilities of themself through making. In this way, the game space blurs the boundaries of author and player, fact and fiction—playing with the notion of the self in the game as an object, as opposed to playing *as* the self narrative through the game.

6.3.1 Seeing the self through the screen

As I have explored at length in Chapters 2, 4 and 5 of this thesis, the personal vignette game as a form tends toward portraying the self through moments of moods and memories. The personal vignette game form fundamentally draws attention to some moment of character—and so how the creator presents that moment to others aesthetically, contextually and interactively holds much of the *person* in the personal game. Where the game screen is both the primary barrier between author and audience, and the medium through which play is mediated, it must provide meaning and direction to players. The size, shape, focus of the game space and the layout of what is shown on screen all provide semiotic clues to the textual

meaning of the piece, as much as any text or interaction. While personal vignette games do not present a strictly narrative storytelling experience in the manner of the literary and filmic text, and are particularly unconcerned with narrative plot, they can still present meaningful *implied* narrative through what the screen does and does not show us. A game screen cannot show the whole complexity of a human life, however, with all of its contexts and connections. The personal vignette game, then, embraces showing snapshots of experience, using limited game screens evocatively to provide depth and rich meaning.

Much like vignettes in photography, film, literature or theatre, the videogame vignette is built around a narrow, directed gaze, reliant on evocative imagery and unconcerned with clear context or surroundings. Representing oneself through this lens of close focus and blurred edges asks creators to be able to consider ourselves in similar ways. In creating my personal vignette games, I consider myself as small, untethered areas of interest—abstract fragments of human experience, a series of connections that make up my whole. In his discussion of the author persona in personal games, Werning argues that autobiographical games present author personas as constellations, sets of characteristic actions or possibilities for actions which portray them;[196] in this way, the author's persona within the game functions as a space for projections of players' assumptions as well as the author's personal experiences. Within my practice, then, I find myself assembling constellations; actions, emotions, aesthetics and moments that represent some part of me, to be connected and interpreted by another.

Within my practice then, I examine myself in sections—the words I say, the things I can see, the actions I carry out, the colours and shapes and movements which hold meaning to me—and then draw together those individual points of interest which present a rich and evocative vignette. The games that make up my own *Habitual*, for example, could have been uploaded to the exhibit website separately, each game isolating a single body part. Once they were all completed, however, I found myself wanting to explicitly link them together, to provide a context for the individual actions. To do so, I combined the games in a homescreen featuring a self portrait [Figure 35], and each game is loaded by selecting the corresponding area on the body.[197]

196 Stefan Werning, 'The Persona in Autobiographical Game-Making as a Playful Performance of the Self', *Persona Studies* 3, no. 1 (2017): 28–42.

197 This choice was also an homage to *My Body, A Wunderkammer* (see Chapter 2.1), which resonated with me a great deal the first time I played through it and has remained important to me since. Though this context will not be immediately obvious to all player, the obvious resemblance between the two games is still a significant addition to the sense of myself I hope the game portrays.

Figure 35: A screenshot of the homescreen of "Habitual", showing a low resolution self portrait with colourful areas to indicate interactions.

Much like the manifestations of player positioning explored in Chapter 4, aspects of myself appear in the games as moments that can be interpreted by a player through the contexts I provide. In this case, the context I aimed to provide is one of my body as a collection of habits and impulses; I am interested in the feeling of what the body does without permission or intent. The connection of the individual scenes, then, serve to reinforce the bodily connection between them; these are not simply individual, conceptual bad habits, they are *my* bad habits. Viewing them as isolated interactions would make it easy to forget that was the case.

While the homescreen that connects the *Habitual* games together presents a complete body, however, the version of myself I created is featureless and loosely detailed. I found that I wanted my presence acknowledged, but for the intimacy between myself and the player to be focused around the interactions. To explore the complexities of my body without baring it for the player to explore, it is dissected and isolated to the relevant parts. To get to these parts, some acknowledgement of my personal presence is required, but the player does not have to see exactly who I am beyond these moments. The homescreen, an abstract version of my body, must be seen and interacted with, and must be touched by the player; but it provides little detail or feedback beyond existing.

This focus shifts dramatically for *Victual*, where the body is implied only by the objects for it to interact with [Figure 36]. The body (*my* body) is irrelevant to the thoughts, displayed through the medium of unsent text messages. As such I disregard it completely, to allow myself some specific form of privacy in this intimate moment of grief. Though I share a great deal of my very personal, intimate internal dialogue through the text messages in the game, I created the game without any need to observe myself externally or objectively. This desire to remove myself as an entity from my grief, and preset it purely as a collection of thoughts, echoes the desire for managed engagement discussed by creators in Chapter 5; I do not desire players to interact with *me* through the game. While I am happy for my internal monologue to reach out to others, the physicality of my existence can be kept for me alone in this instance, and so some measure of personal control felt retained by removing myself from the screen.

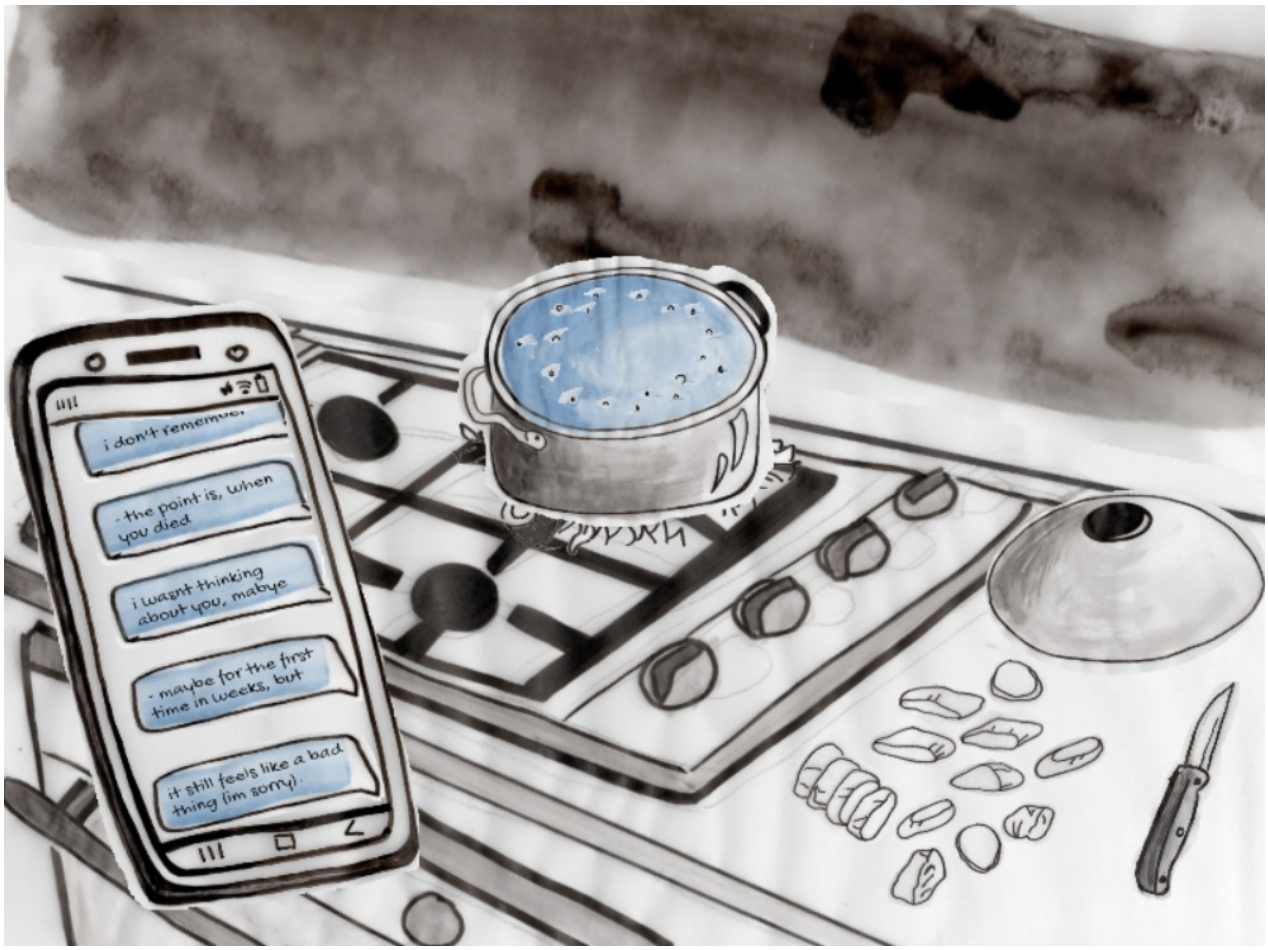


Figure 36: A screenshot of the game "Victual", scrolling through messages on a phone.

These choices of presentation and focus, then, asked me throughout my practice to consider not only my physical existence as it manifests through the screen, but also my desires, interests, or state of mind. The ghosts of sketches that remain in *Victual* (section 6.2.3) are not only a reminder that the game did not come from nowhere; they are also a purposeful choice to make an untidy aspect of my personal experience into a visible game element. Their

inclusion is, in part, a decision to push back against any idea that in creating a game around my grief, I must make it palatable to others. Neither I nor my coping were tidy, and in creating the work I realised that my games and my public self were allowed to reflect this aspect of my lived experience.

6.3.2 Extending the self through the game space

As explored in Chapter 4, aspects of the game scenes, interactions, and aesthetics carry with them personality and perspective which connect player and creator. In the aesthetics, presentation and framing of the game, the creator-self is present as a fluid entity represented by the game space as a whole. The ways in which the player may navigate, change or manipulate this space must factor alongside the set-dressing of the game. Whether a personal experience is shared from the creator's internal perspective or from an external one, whether the player inhabits the scene as actor or observer, the game space itself can also reveal something about the author to the player.

Creators may use the act of making to create a sense of themselves within the game, then, to extend their presence in the world and show aspects of themselves through the game as a whole. Through my practice, I exist as a concept beyond the events and entities within the game; I am also present in my aesthetic choices, as a series of interactions, and as the boundaries of what is and is not shown to players. It is not only the stories I tell through my games, but the contexts I afford them and the entities players inhabit, that shape the version of me which is presented and performed by the game. From the objects on the table in *Victual* (handmade and misshapen dumplings, scattered untidily) to the background colours of *Habitual* (an unassuming grey-blue), I explore what my existence looks and feels like to me through the objects and colours that evoke particular feelings or memories for me.

While creating my games, I am considering the aesthetics not for what is most appealing, but for how I can portray myself beyond the physical shape of my body. Hyper-focused scenes such as those of *Habitual* (which show only a close up body part), for example, facilitate a much more immediate connection between player and space; locked into a single view, fixated on a particular sensation. Large static spaces like the connected paths of *Situal* use the space for self direction, asking players to construct their own timeline as a reflection of the real-life events it portrays—those of curiosity, rambling, lingering in a scene, and the imperfect memories of those events later on.

The separation of myself as a creator from my experiences shared through the screen (or the lack of separation between the two) is a complex issue, though. While I am in my games, and made from the experiences of my games, I am also separated from them by the asynchronous presentation of play; once the game is created, it can happen without me. All of these negotiations of what "self" means within the space of a personal vignette must take place as I create the version of myself I wish to share. The game and the space in which it is created become a space to experiment with how the sense of self is experienced by the creator, and how it may be perceived by and for others.

Though the games themselves may be treated as completed objects by players, a fluid and ongoing connection to my practice also allows me, if I have the desire, to confirm that I *still* exist. The game creation does not have to be untethered from the author once a game is initially "finished"; the ability to continue with the making outweighs the sense of completion found in a "finished" game. After entering a period of local lockdown in response to the 2020 global pandemic, for example, I found myself returning to *Situal* (a game about the small curiosities I have found while wandering) not with any *new* content, but with a richer level of detail. The then forbidden nature of a trip somewhere to ramble found me captivated by what I could remember of previous walks, and determined to re-explore those moments in a way that was still accessible and permitted. I added content to the game that changed very little of its shape or how it presented itself, but that reflected the changed relationship between me and my memories of walks. The game grew, barely noticeably, alongside me.

To some extent, an on-going game creation process as discussed above becomes an exercise not in designing, but in impulsively decorating a digital space. This is particularly pertinent in regards to the more approachable game creation tools, which offer only a handful of options when it comes to the aesthetic choices available. The question driving creation becomes not *what do I want* but *what here do I like*. Akin to putting up posters and Polaroids onto rented bedroom walls, the poetic and open-ended format of many personal vignette games encourages re-engaging with the subject (and the self) to reconnect with an aspect of the self that has more room for exploration, evolution, or personal joy. The game space becomes a playground space for examining, collecting and curating memories, moments or details.

6.3.3 The self as a private/public creation

A common assumption behind much game design, though refuted throughout this thesis, is that the game exists to be played by an audience, made for and completed by the interaction of the public. The creation of personal vignette games disrupts this notion, offering instead the

idea that some games may be made only for friends, family, private groups or the creators themselves (see Chapter 5.2.3). Many of the creators interviewed in Chapter 5 hoped to reach *specific* audiences, such as people with shared experiences, or people interested in their particular style of game, but were happy for their games to be played by anyone who wished to do so in good faith. These differing approaches to the audience highlight a range of intentions around who plays personal vignette games; whether they are created publicly, privately, or somewhere between the two.

Between private and public creation, I find the same desire to create and complete games, but the creation comes with different perceptions of "complete". In the course of my practice, finishing a personal vignette game did not always end with 'I have created a fully playable game that another can understand', but often with 'I have achieved what I hoped for' instead. My achievements may be purely a sense of satisfaction, having enjoyed the act of making something for long enough, or having thought an idea out to its final form without the need to make it so in the game.

When considering whether my games will be publicly or privately decipherable, I am not only considering who will play them, but what content they will hold. As seen in Chapter 4.2, elements of personal vignette games may require such specific personal contents to decipher them that their meaning is functionally private, despite being publicly available within the game. Artefacts such as textures made from photographs of the creator's own hair, or significant dates used within the game's code (such as in *MEC:R*) are effectively secrets for the author, an act of self-expression that is most significant in the making of the game.

Games created to provide evocative memory jogs for the creator, or to document specific events, may feel intimately private and incomprehensible to players—but this is not to say that those games are *not* shared, and so the game might sit somewhere *between* private and public. In these cases, though I know my own authorial intentions will not be the only reading of a personal vignette game, I found myself wishing to retain a sense of connection and ownership with the games despite their public audience. Much like creator assertions in Chapter 5 that "the game is me", I connect to my games not only through their significance as objects of my creation, but also by their existence as an extension of myself—my personal vignette games are artefacts I both identify with and inhabit.

In my own practice, *Victual*—a game exploring the death of a close friend and the ways I use cooking to show care for others—was created to explore my own complicated feelings on the loss, and its ties to other aspects of my life. The game was shared publicly with others,

however, on the possibility of finding connections with people who might understand the background emotion of the piece through their own contexts. I do not, then, perceive the game as it exists in private in the same way that I perceive it as a public object. In private, as I made and played the game, it connected me with my own very specific sense of loss, preserved moments I was afraid I might forget, and allowed me some semblance of a conversation I would never get to have outside of the game. In public, shared with anyone on my website, it is an ambiguous grief, shared in the hope that others might connect with it in their own way, for their own reasons; even my friends name[198] does not feature.

6.4 Discussion

Through examining the practice of creating personal vignette games, and the ways in which creators explore themselves through the process, I argue that the importance of a completed game is matched in importance by the *experience* of making it. I find here that *the significance of personal creative process* (as the sub-question underpinning this study queries) is in the act of making itself;the impulsive, situational and near disposable nature of personal vignette game design provides creative space for artistic games, made without concern or intent for the end artifact. This approach offers a certain freedom, which carries forward into the self-exploratory aspect of creating personal vignette games. In following inspirations, focuses and creative impetuses centred on the creators themselves, personal vignette games present a creative practice that uses the act of making as a statement and reminder about existing in an everyday sense.

In the creation of my personal vignette games, I find an embodied practice of establishing a meaningful place for myself through creative acts. There is space for exploring aspects of myself in the games and the content they contain, but also in the personal time set aside for introspective creativity, and in the choices around how my games are presented to others. The act of creating, then, became an ongoing personal dialogue around my needs, desires and intents. By examining the self through personal creative acts, I reaffirm or uncover aspects of my own identity as it emerges through elements of the game. In this way, I argue that personal vignette games are not simply *about* the creator, but extensions of the creator by virtue of this self-focused practice. Personal vignette game creation, for me, has been a statement and performance of the self, utilising the game space and the practice itself as a tool for self exploration. By following impulsive investigations into fragments of self as an everyday, personal or private creativity, creating personal vignette games becomes an exercise not in creating a *literal* self-portrait, but an evocative and representational one. Akin to writing a

198 Alice.

diary, doodling a sketch, or humming a tune, creating personal vignette games makes space for an introspective and interpersonal act of creativity—utilised not just to create a videogame, but as an approachable everyday craft for the pleasure of being able to make/say/see something about the creator. The messy, unplanned creation of personal vignette games allows creators to speak to themselves through creation as much as the finished games may speak to an audience through.

By de/re-constructing or re-imagining personal experiences according to personal interest, chosen boundaries, and creative circumstances, personal vignette games show not only the experience that prompted the work, but the sense of the author as a creative entity. I also find articulated thoughts through the work itself; the game is not *about* something, it *is* something, an extension and statement of the author unique to the ways in which it was created. Rather than designing toward an end goal—education, embodiment, immersion, excitement—*making* it is in and of itself the point of the game. By examining the self through personal creative acts, creators may reaffirm that they are present, to themselves and to others. The act of producing a work holds value not through sales or success, but through the act itself; the way in which creation allows for everyday reflections of lived experiences. We laugh, we cry, and we create.

7. Conclusion

When you play these you're playing a small "one in a million gem". Someone made something beautiful for you to experience. If you resonate with it, that's love shared between you and the person that made it.[199]

Throughout this thesis I have investigated the production, play and personal significance of personal vignette games, contributing to the understanding of their form and practice. More broadly, these investigations have contributed to understanding the importance of personal game content as an achievable creative pursuit. Perhaps the most obvious conclusion of this thesis as a whole is that the creation, study or discussion of personal vignette games benefits from an awareness of their contexts, and some distance from more established commercial framing of game design and development.

I have considered the primary research question—*how are vignette games used to explore personal experiences?*—through differing perspectives throughout this thesis. To begin, I established the context and history behind the form (Chapter 2). To explore the nuances of the ways personal vignette games are used as play, as practice and as personal exploration, I then addressed three individual sub-questions within the research; *how does the personal vignette game portray an author's personal experiences, what are the authors' connections to the personal vignette game,* and *what is the significance of personal creative process. To do so, I* focused on three different aspects of the personal vignette game: the products created, the people creating them, and the creative processes themselves. To answer the first sub-question —*how does the personal vignette game portray an author's personal experiences*— I considered how authors and players share meaningful space within the games (Chapter 4), and how to read a personal vignette as a dialogue with the self and others (Chapters 4 and 6). To explore *what are the authors' connections to the personal vignette game,* I have provided insight into who the creators making personal vignette games are, and what identities exist around the games (Chapter 5). I have also explored what motivates creators to make and share their games, addressing both *what are the authors' connections to the personal vignette game* and *what is the significance of personal creative process* (Chapters 5 and 6). Through the previous chapters exploring these various aspects of the personal vignette game, my investigations have provided a history and contexts from which many of the games have emerged (Chapter 2), their unconventional approach to persona in play (Chapter 4), their impact and

199 Nathalie Lawhead, "Altgames Workshop: A Discussion of Surrealism and Personal Stories in Games" n.d., in *candybox* (blog), http://www.nathalielawhead.com/candybox/altgames-workshop-a-discussion-of-surrealism-and-personal-stories-in-games.

significance to their creators (Chapter 5), and the creative act as it relates to the creator (Chapter 6).

The sub-questions and contexts through which I approached my research provide insight into the motivations and values found in personal vignette games as a for mof DIY autobiography. After introducing the boundaries of this investigation, the context chapter (Chapter 2) of this thesis establishes the ways in which personal vignette games can be considered as both a kind of game and a personal expression. As games they are stripped down, poetic interactions with a narrow focus on character or mood; as personal expressions they offer a mode of DIY autobiography comparable to zines, hypertext literature and performance pieces. The chapter highlights the particular shape and feel of vignette games, as well as tracing routes from life-writing in experimental hypertext fiction and DIY zine culture, to the creation of contemporary personal vignettes games. Through this exploration of form and contexts, I offer a brief history of the personal vignette game through the developing DIY game scene and a number of influences on personal games. The research carried out and presented within this context chapter is itself one of the contributions of this thesis, situating personal vignette games within the contexts of their influences, and examining what unites the varying natures of the form.

Chapter 4 addresses the handling of the author's personal content as accessed by a player, exploring how personal vignette games share lived experiences meaningfully with others. The chapter offers a close reading of positioning and poetics in *MEC:R* (and others), exploring how personal vignette games present personal content to players through various shared perspectives, to promote meaningful intimacy and understanding. I present this set of perspectives on the game as the *player positioning*—a shared author/player performance of 'personal' experience through shifts in perspective, shaped by the player's cognitive/affective role within the scene. This player positioning framework is an important contribution of this thesis—not only as an exploration of how authors talk about themselves in personal vignette games, but in providing a lens through which similar games might be meaningfully read by others. From this examination arises a distinctly fluid role of both the player and the author in the games, sharing a mutable and often indistinct persona. Within this nebulous persona and shifting perspective, the "personal" aspect of the game becomes fluid and interpretive. This indefinite persona/perspective allows for complex meaningful connection between player and author, with space for players to develop their understanding of the game through their own personal contexts.

Chapter 5 further explores the complexity of the author's relationships to their games as a practice; what it means for creators to make and share games of their own experiences, privately and publicly. In doing so, I present five shared themes of personal vignette creation alongside three main aspects of creators' experiences of making. The five themes from the interviews—*facilitated game creation* (5.2.1), *playing with form* (5.2.2), *challenging perceptions and making statements* (5.2.3), *managed terms of engagement* (5.2.4), and *seeing and being seen (5.2.5)*—present an overview of personal vignette game creation as an artistic practice, an embodied community, and a statement of the self. Through these themes, the personal vignette game can be seen as a way of establishing supportive boundaries around personal play, sharing aspects of the self with others communally and reciprocally, through environments which support creativity, privacy and human connection. Across the themes discussed in Chapter 5, there are three shared aspects of personal vignette design which reflect how creators approached their craft. These three approaches to creation—personal vignette design as seen (i) through positive restrictions (ii) as playful creativity and (iii) for self-expression—provide a grounding in understanding the personal vignette game not only as a game, but as a meaningful experience for creators.

Chapter 5 also contributes three useful lenses for future explorations of motivations and benefits behind creating personal vignette games. Throughout the interviews, a number of uncertainties arise around the personal vignette game as a form; from how the authors view their completed works to what to call them, there are more concrete opinions on what *is not* than what *is*, a lean toward the personal vignette game as a countercultural tool. This too is a useful contextual contribution to further study of personal vignette games, as a warning against over-categorisation or rigid formulae for the games. The creators, unconcerned by these contradictions or uncertainties, assert that they are simply a part of the process.

Chapter 6, building on the aspects of creation from Chapter 5, explores the act of making and influences on the creator through my own creative practice. The creation of a suite of personal vignette games entitled *rough edges* explores the personal significance of creating personal vignette games as a practice, and as a dialogue with the self over time. The reflection on creating these works examines how specific personal experiences in the game are chosen or shaped, as well as on the complexity of existing alongside my own sense of self as represented by the game spaces. The personal vignette game facilitates a creative exploration of human existence through not only the game, but through the sensations of the creative act, and a complex personal connection to the games as public (or private) objects.

Through these various perspectives on the form, its champions and its contexts, it is clear that the prevalent ideas behind the personal vignette game are those of unclear boundaries: of a blurred and relaxed approach to game creation; of poetic and abstract play; of purposefully leaving space unfilled, games unfinished and words unspoken. Uncertainty around the role of the author and the player in particular arise frequently across this thesis—from how the player finds connection to the author within them and how much of the game remains as a part of the author, to the broad realm of what 'personal' can mean within creation and play. From their complex form to the uncertainty of where personal becomes public, the personal vignette game does not follow a simple set of design rules. Throughout the works and the discussion around them, there are notable tendencies towards an impulsive, artistic and highly personal method of design—one that lies outside the realm of design frameworks or formalised approaches, and remains largely unconcerned with measurable player responses of any particular kind. With these shared threads in mind, and conscious of the difficulties of approaching personal vignette design formally, I would like to present instead an ethos for the personal vignette game; not a design approach, so much as number of shared sensibilities that scaffold the eclectic, undefinable and fluid shape of personal vignette games.

7.1 An ethos for personal vignette games

The ethos I summarise here represents key, recurring points of intent and practice around personal vignette games, as they arose throughout this thesis. This ethos, then, provides a useful tool for reflecting on the outcomes of my studies into personal vignette games, which may be considered as a set of guidelines for practitioners or researchers.

This ethos has been developed by amalgamating the major discussion points of the three studies presented earlier in this thesis into a coherent set of principles, approaches and motivations behind personal vignette game creation. I have re-examined the data and discussions discussed in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 to find recurring themes around personal vignette games' content and communication as well as the values and motivations of the works to their creators. While it may not be a definitive or exhaustive ethos, due to the variations of personal approaches from any given creator or community, it presents the significant findings shared amongst the creators, practices, and games examined and discussed within this thesis.

My aim with this creative ethos is to provide a strong starting point both for those interested in creating personal vignette games themselves, and for future nuanced discussion around the works and the communities surrounding them. Whether creating, playing or contemplating

the works from a critical standpoint, this ethos provides a clear summary of the dynamics of the personal vignette game as both form and practice.

1. Making the mundane

Personal vignette games offer a playful exploration of experiences outside of traditional, more formalised games narratives. They are used to explore both specific under-represented experiences, and mundane ubiquitous ones in small and sincere ways. The personal vignette game's interest in the minutiae of day-to-day life takes a perspective on what makes "interesting" game design and narrative through a specific lens: allowing for everyday occurrences to be explored as the intimate, absurd, mundane and ineffable everyday moments that make us human.

2. Embracing everyday creativity

This small-scale approach extends beyond the specific content of the game, and into the methods of making them. The personal vignette offers a low pressure, unplanned approach to game creation that is highly self focused, approachable, small scale and ordinary. Largely unconcerned with conventional interests in audience or technical performance, complexity or commercial success, the personal vignette instead encourages game making as a craft for personal pleasure and social enjoyment.

3. Valuing "small" ideas

Much like the approach to the creative act itself, the personal vignette game encourages the playful and evocative potential of brevity. By focusing on one particular moment or experience, windowing in on the core concepts of what is interesting to communicate, personal vignette games become brief, memorable snapshots of the self. This approach emphasises smallness, in both their creation and their content, as a valuable tool for presenting intimate aspects of the self.

4. Making playfully

The personal vignette game is not only a playful representation of the self, but also a chance to experiment with the *idea* of play. Much of the work of personal vignette game creators is innovative and engaging due to how the boundaries of the form have been tested, ignored or reshaped. The personal vignette game, with its unspecific form and poetic tendencies, sees creators creating by following playful creative impulse as much as by design. This playful method of making brings greater freedom for pushing the boundaries of game design and tool

possibilities; because it does not suit the game or creator, because they feel like it, because they were not aware the boundaries were even there in the first place.

5. Expression through poetic play

The small design approaches employed by personal vignette games lead to an emphasis on the *feel* of an interaction above its function as a rules system, its technical behaviour, etc. Much like the poetry cited as an inspiration by many of the creators interviewed within this thesis, personal vignette games make use of emotional landscapes and symbolic interactions above comprehensible narrative or a "functional" game. The use of abstract, irregular, mechanics and game spaces allows for affective and cognitive connection between the player and the authors lived experiences, through an interpretive lens.

6. Connecting through creation

Creating a personal vignette game is not simply to create a finished object for a player, but an opening to a mediated, asynchronous dialogue with another—an exploration of the author and player perspectives shaped by individual contexts. The personal vignette game is created as a gift, as an extension of friendly in-jokes, as a hand extended to those with similar life experiences, as part of a communal exchange of experience and ideas, or simply as an expression of self that someone (anyone) might find and play. This connection may not always be between the author and a player, either; through the creation, updating and revisiting of personal vignette games, the author themself may find insight and new connections to their own prior experiences.

7. Putting the personal before the player

Though much of the work of this thesis has been concerned with the player/author sharing of personal experiences, many of those outcomes are not the primary goals of the works. Within the personal vignette game, there is an acknowledged and indeed celebrated trend toward self indulgent creation; negotiating agency for personal rather than player comfort, releasing or not releasing games depending on the author's own needs. Though the self often exists as an abstract or "undesigned" entity within the game (as mediated through the screen and interactions), the priority of creation and enjoyment remains firmly on the side of the creator.

7.2 The personal vignette phenomenon

The personal vignette ethos as presented in section 7.1 points towards a reclamation of creative practice; a craft which is moving away from highly technical creativity and embracing

approachability, imperfection, and the complexity of personal experience. Rather than presenting smallness as merely an interesting creative constraint, this thesis argues that it is this very smallness that allows for the wide inclusion and celebration of individual, personal voices in game creation; not as the celebrated auteur, but as the playfully, purposefully ordinary. From the tools used to make them to the stories they contain, the short form and simplicity of personal vignette games is presented largely as coming from adopting a wider perspective on the possibilities of games—an embrace of their poetic potential to say a great deal without being crowded with content. Personal vignette games are a form of game currently little studied or discussed academically and, as this thesis explores, represent a novel avenue for creative self-expression.

The ethos that emerges from the works within this thesis makes an argument for further investigations into the personal and social benefits of playful creative tools and community spaces built around these notions. Similarities occur within this thesis to motivations behind creative movements like those of Ruberg's *queer games avant-garde*[200] and Keogh's *informal game development*,[201] (both of which contain significant overlaps with the creators and ethos of personal vignette games). Approachability, small-scale creation, playful connection and design imperfection are all elements of demystifying game design through approaching the activity as a craft, and valuing the videogame as a personal creativity rather than an inherently commercial commodity (a shift in the creative dynamic which allows for a broadening of who *can* make games).

This thesis highlights how, within the practice and performance of personal vignette games, personal play might be considered academically and practically. To fully appreciate the intricacies of creating playful self-narratives on this intimate scale requires a language of games which encompasses persona and presence, intention and interpretation, conversation and negotiation. It is also apparent, from these initial studies into the form, that it is important for personal vignette games to be viewed in an appropriate context. The personal vignette game is not simply a first step on an aspirational videogame development journey, or an exploitable or marketable teaching tool. For many personal vignette game creators, the works are aspects of themselves, to be engaged with as more than objects for the audience's benefit. The discussions within this thesis make it clear that the personal vignette game must be

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

201 Brendan Keogh, "Who Else Makes Videogames? Considering Informal Development Practices", *Brendan Keogh Blog* (blog), 2017, https://brkeogh.com/2017/07/11/who-else-makes-videogames-considering-informal-development-practices/.

considered first and foremost as *personal*; that is, an extension of a creator, a fragment of the self.

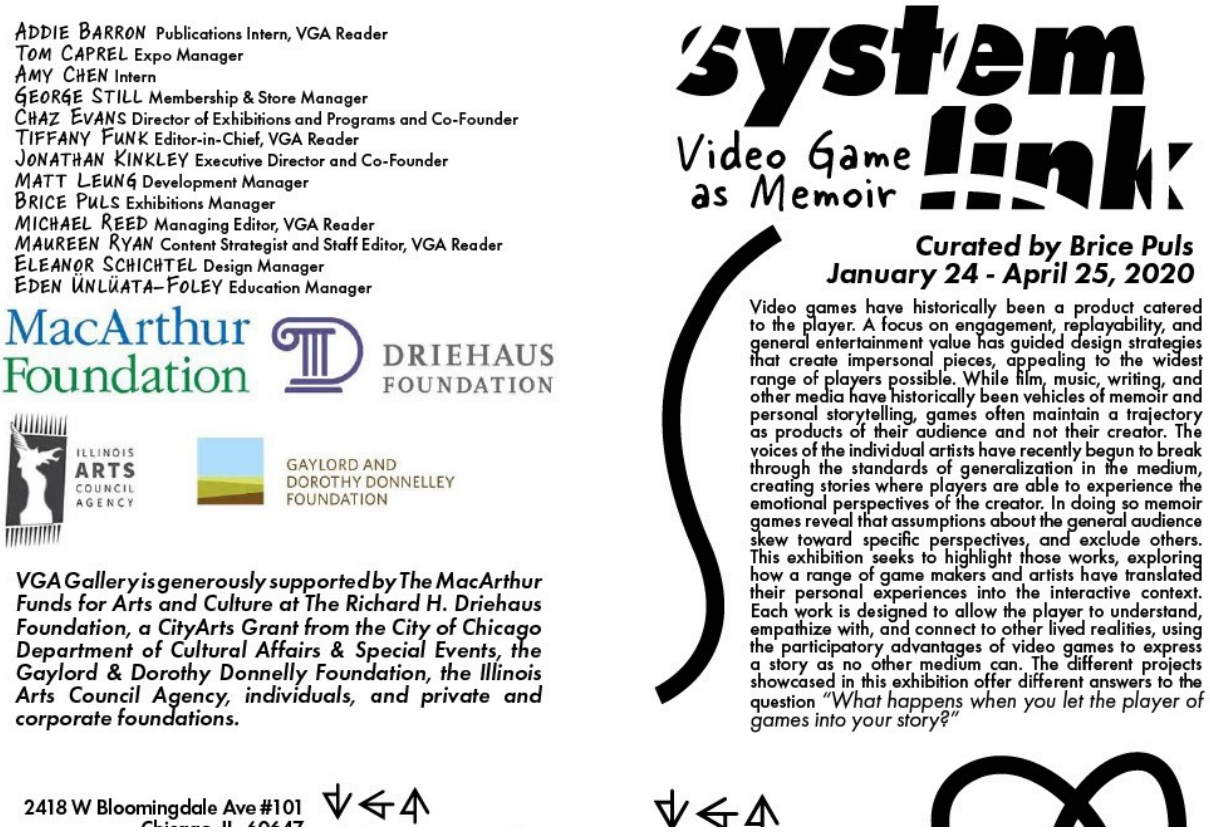
This thesis is by necessity limited in scope, and as such presents a variety of interesting new questions for future works. Focusing on the methods and motivations behind personal vignette game creation in primarily online, English-speaking spaces reveals one potential narrative behind the form: investigations in other spaces and contexts however may reveal others. While this thesis touches on the connections between creators and audiences (most prominently in Chapter 5), there are a number of unexplored impacts on both—some creators touched on issues of parasocial relationships, cultural expectations and long term personal impact of publishing personal vignette games as they grow in popularity. It is clear from much of the work within this thesis that the personal vignette game as a concept extends past the games themselves. There is personal meaning also in the places they are shared, the paratexts and marginalia presented alongside the games, and the significance of the existence of games that players do not (and never will) see; further studies or practices in these areas would provide more depth to the understanding of personal vignette games presented here. Finally, this thesis is concerned primarily with the author, as creating games and represented by them, and as such does not focus often on the player and their experiences. While I have provided an overview of personal vignette game *production*, personal vignette game *consumption* is still an under-explored area with its own unique insights to offer.

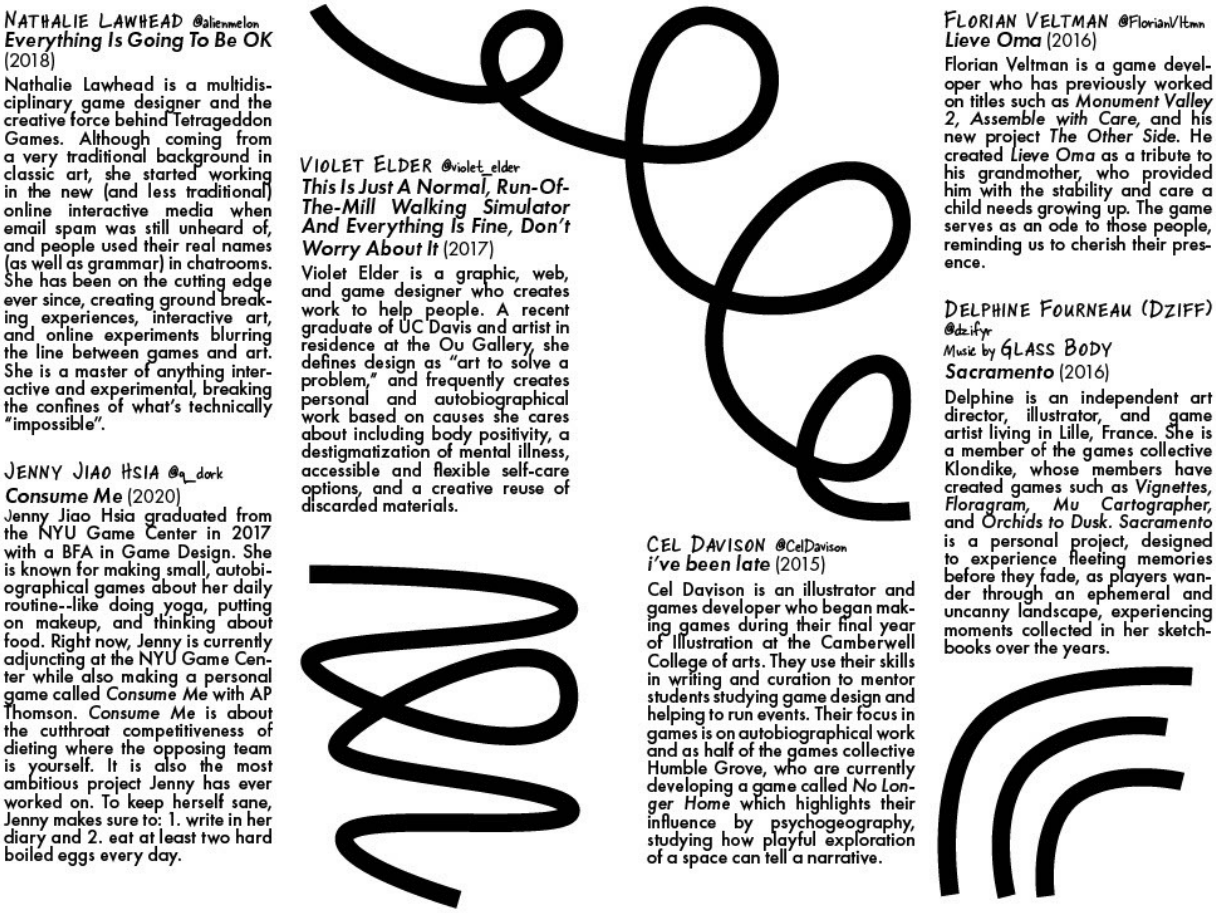
While researching and writing this thesis, I have explored the dynamics of design, self and community through which personal vignettes games offer up sincere, inventive, honest, intimate, humorous, irreverent, messy interpretations of personal experiences—interactive snapshots that go beyond a simple narrative retelling, and into a shared performance. The personal vignette game, as explored with this work, exists as a statement of person-hood and personality. As an object and a practice, they create a personal and social dialogue centring play around small moments of what it means to be human. Utilising game techniques to create playful expression of ineffable experience, authors are materialising, theorising and playing out their ideas of games and the self. Within personal vignette games authors allow themselves to be purposefully and visibly present through the practice and performance of their game making, as well as through the games themselves. In connecting authors and players through mediated game spaces this way, personal vignette games offer a mode of creation and play that speaks to the value of personal, approachable creativity; of playful human connection; of being heard and seen, through the mediums that allow us to express ourselves meaningfully and on our own terms. This thesis ultimately argues that personal

vignette games ask us, in order to hear personal stories clearly, to be open to novel ways of speaking to others, and ourselves.

Appendices

I. System Link Booklet





II. Personal Vignette Game Design, Speculative interview schedule

This list provides the rough outline that the interviews will follow to explore the personal vignette games of each interviewee. These questions aim to spark areas of discussion around design and narrative agency, which will then be explored with more nuance depending on the initial response from the interviewee.

Although this is not an exhaustive list of interview questions, it does cover the main areas of interest for the study.

1. Can you start by telling me about what brought you to making personal games?
2. Can you tell me a little about the games you've made?
    1. What was the main inspiration for the game?
3. Would you describe your game as abstract? Why / Why not?
4. Can you tell me how a player acts in your game?
    1. What mechanics exist?
    2. What is the space they play in like?
    3. How does the world react to the player?
    4. What do you hope the player sees / feels here?
5. Who do you think the player *is*, in your game?
    1. Are you trying to show them something?
    2. Are you trying to communicate with them?
6. Who did you make it for? Why?
7. Do you still feel in control of the game(s) and what it's(they're) saying?
8. How do YOU describe your games?

Is there anything that you'd like to talk about? Do you have any questions?

III. Games discussed with interviewees

Emilie Reed	*Roadtrip:* https://coleo_kin.itch.io/roadtrip *dead wife game:* https://coleo_kin.itch.io/dead-wife-game *oh no:* https://coleo_kin.itch.io/oh-no
Jennifer Raye	*Boa Retina:* https://jenniferraye.itch.io/boa-retina *Imperishable Memories:* https://jenniferraye.itch.io/imperishable-memories *I Locked Myself In My Room For Three Weeks And Just Looked At Anime Smut Online:* https://jenniferraye.itch.io/i-locked-myself-in-my-room-for-three-weeks-and-just-looked-at-anime-smut-online
Nina Freeman	*Cibele:* http://ninasays.so/cibele/ *Ladylike:* http://ninasays.so/ladylike/ *We Met In May:* http://ninasays.so/may/
Becky Leigh	*A little birdy:* https://becklespinax.itch.io/a-little-birdy
Sam	*Iapetus:* https://heyits5am.itch.io/iapetus *Night Drive:* https://heyits5am.itch.io/night-drive
Rose	*Fill The World With Your Rainbow:* https://modernmodron.itch.io/fill-the-world-with-your-rainbow *My Name Is Rose:* https://modernmodron.itch.io/my-name-is-rose
Jenny Jiao Hsia	*Consume Me:* https://q_dork.itch.io/consume-me *and i made sure to hold your head sideways:* https://q_dork.itch.io/and-i-made-sure-to-hold-your-head-sideways *chat with me:* https://q_dork.itch.io/chat-with-me
Cel Davison	*i've been late:* https://celdavison.itch.io/ive-been-late *Friary Road:* https://humblegrove.itch.io/friary-road *No Longer Home:* https://humblegrove.com/
Vaida	*Where the punks at*: https://vaidap.itch.io/wherethepunksat
Marie Claire LeBlanc Flanagan	*Other Hands:* https://marieflanagan.com/other-hands/ *undertow:* https://globalgamejam.org/2017/games/undertow
Florencia Rumpel Rodriguez	*Doom Fetito:* https://rumpel.itch.io/doom-fetito *Like Civilized People:* https://rumpel.itch.io/como-la-gente-civilizada
Alex Camilleri	*Memoir en Code: Reissue:* https://www.memoirencode.com/
Hannah Rose	*Small Talk:* https://hannah-rose.itch.io/smalltalk *Personal Space:* https://hannah-rose.itch.io/personal-space
Becca	*Tutorial: Get Chunks, Talk to Your Friend The Bird:* https://bedwords.itch.io/tutorial-get-chunks-talk-to-your-friend-the-bird
Amy	*Mushrooms red as meat:* https://acgodliman.itch.io/mushrooms-red-as-meat *Four Corners:* https://acgodliman.itch.io/four-corners
Lisa Janssens	*Reason:* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBmszntpSxw

IV. *ROUGH EDGES* exhibition website

rough edges: a micro low-tech exhibition

the games

Habitual, *Situal* and *Victual* were made as part of a Creative Practice study, looking at DIY personal vignette games. Each game can be played in under 5 minutes, with a standard mouse and keyboard.

Exhibiting the games, and making space for players to leave comments about their experiences with them, is parts of a personal critical reflection on the works. **Your experiences are a part of that, and you can leave a comment to tell me about them.**

resources

Download some zines about diy personal games, or find tools to make games of your own

guestbook:
tell me what you think?

Who made these?

thryn h is a 29 year old queer game designer and diy artist from yorkshire. They're currently working on their phd at the university of York.
They make playful digital and physical media, mostly games.

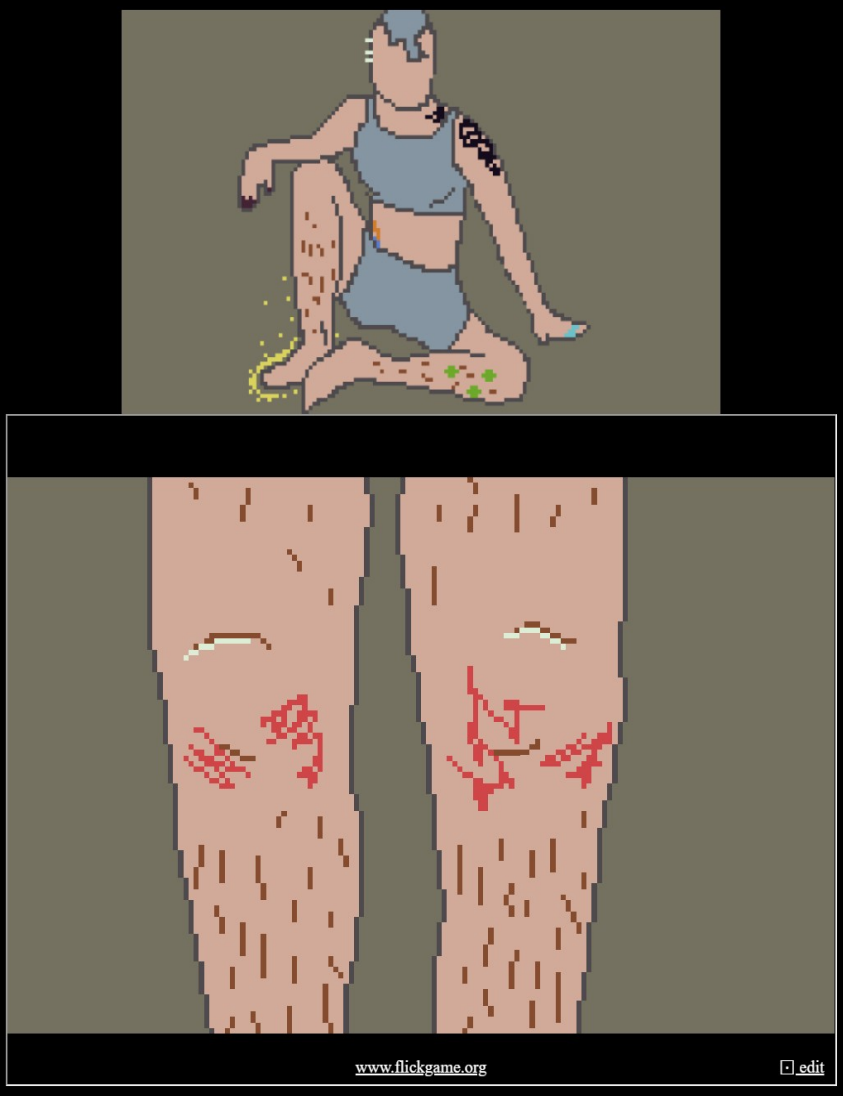
You can find them on twitter or their non-digital games on itch.io

HOME > GAMES

HABITUAL

CONTENT WARNINGS: skin picking, blood

Controls: mouse



HABITUAL is a series of micro interactions about a body's small movements and bad habits.

HOME > GAMES

SITUAL

Playable through sokworlds

THE GAME WOULD GO HERE IF YOU COULD PLAY IT IN BROWSER. BUT YOU CAN'T. I'M SORRY.

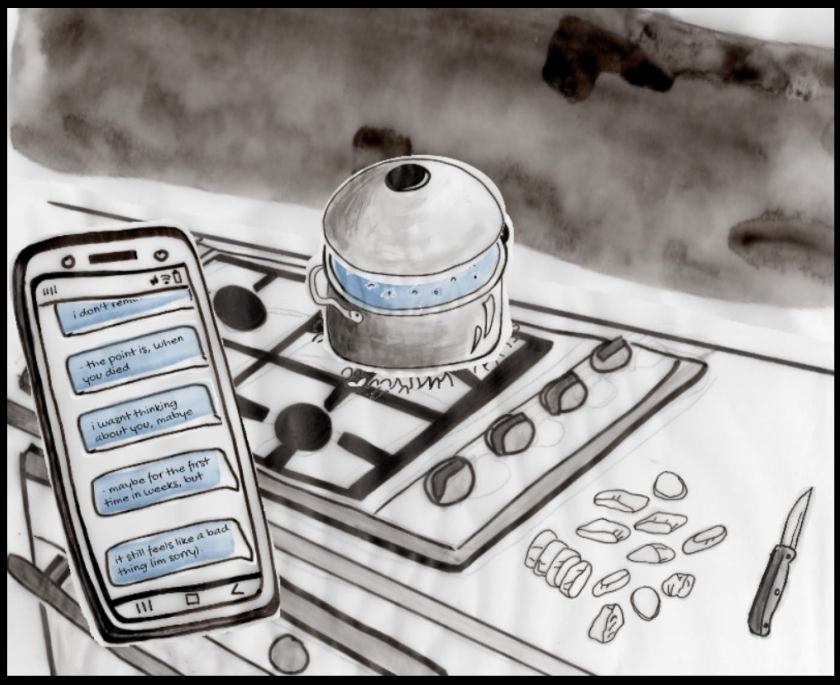
SITUAL is a walkie*, a mishmash dream of bits of walks I remember, and how it feels to be in a place.
this game was made using sokworlds, so you can't play it on this website. But if you'd like to play it and you own sokworlds, you'll find it there.

HOME > GAMES

VICTUAL

Content warnings: Death, grief, long-term illness

Controls: W/S, mouse



VICTUAL is a flatgame about loss and cooking, change and grief. It fiddles a little with the flatgame rules, but it has the spirit

guestbook:
tell me what you think?

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