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# Digital Games and the Category of Auteur: An Intersectional Approach

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# Disclaimer

The parts of this work appeared in the following articles and chapters of collective works:

# Introduction

This dissertation originated from my earlier research on the relationship between feminism and digital games. Some of the most pivotal games I analyzed early in my academic career were created by females. My journey began with an examination of French digital games from the 1980s. During this period, Chine Lanzmann introduced explicit feminist themes in *La femme qui ne supportait pas les ordinateurs*,[1] Clotilde Marion criticized patriarchal South American right-wing dictatorships in *Même les pommes de terre ont des yeux!*,[2] and most notably, Muriel Tramis designed the first postcolonial games overall: *Méwilo*[3] and *Freedom*.[4] These games were groundbreaking in their time, addressing controversial topics and well-crafted, but few remember them outside of France. Over time, I began to question why these and other essential games created by females were forgotten.

In the journalistic discourse around digital games, male names credited with revolutionizing the industry are continually mentioned. Figures like John Carmack, Will Wright, Peter Molyneux, Sid Meier, and Shigeru Miyamoto are widely recognized. The digital gaming industry eagerly showcases charismatic creators in an effort to legitimize digital entertainment as a crucial cultural domain. However, this cult of personality, which stems from the cinematic auteur theory, does not seem to extend beyond cis-gendered men. Auteur theory in digital games—the method of promoting creators of collective works—is highly selective, leading numerous researchers to reject it.

Nevertheless, in the 2010s, the work of once-respected female developers, such as Muriel Tramis and Roberta Williams, who had long disappeared from the realm of critical interest, began to be rediscovered. Simultaneously, increasing attention is being paid to tracking contemporary female creativity, not only in the so-called Western cultural sphere but also beyond it. As a

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[1]  Froggy Software, *La femme qui ne supportait pas les ordinateurs*, version Apple II (France: Froggy Software, 1986).

[2]  Froggy Software, *Même les pommes de terre ont des yeux!*, version Apple II (France: Froggy Software, 1985).

[3]  Coktel Vision, *Méwilo*, version Atari ST (France: Coktel Vision, 1987).

[4]  Coktel Vision, *Freedom*, version Amiga (France: Coktel Vision, 1988).

result, the auteur category may regain significance if applied to female artists overlooked by the journalistic mainstream.

The auteur category will be redefined in this context. While it is common to view the auteur as the sole creator of a work, this category can also apply to individuals who frequently collaborate with other developers. Moreover, although the authorship of collective works has traditionally been associated with the role of the director, an auteur can hold various positions as long as their output remains consistent.

Intersectional theory can showcase the potential diversity of auteur theory. Intersectionality primarily concerns the overlap between different social categories: gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, etc. It examines patterns of marginalization or discrimination against individuals based on the numerous underprivileged categories they belong to.

However, I must clarify that I approach intersectionality in a narrow sense due to the complexity of the framework. To simplify, in the context of intersectionality, I mainly focus on females, primarily considering the impact of their gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality on the challenges they have encountered or continue to face. Nevertheless, I do not claim to fully define what intersectionality is.

Intersectional thought is approximated in Chapter 1, where I briefly describe the origin of the term "intersectionality" and attempt to explain its theoretical roots and central issues. Indeed, intersectionality partly has its roots in postcolonial thought. Postcolonialism, the principles of which I explain throughout the paper (especially in Chapters 1 and 4), essentially focuses on the study of discursive methods used to subjugate foreign peoples and the far-reaching impact colonialism has had on contemporary privilege distribution. This subjugation includes, but is not limited to, European colonial conquests in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Before Kimberlé Cranshaw formulated the intersectional framework in 1989, multifaceted oppression of women was debated within postcolonial feminist movements such as the Third World Liberation Front and Africana womanism,[5] later described in Section 1.3.1.

Why do I connect intersectionality research with auteur theory? There are several reasons. Firstly, the intersectionality framework enables me to position auteur theory beyond male creativity and outside Eurocentric cultural discourse. The in-depth analyses presented in Chapter 4 include the work of four females from different countries and cultures: Muriel Tramis, Elisabeth LaPensée, Christine Love, and Meg Jayanth. Each has a distinct identity:

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[5]   For a concise presentation of the links between the mentioned movements, see Umme Al-wazedi, "Postcolonial Feminism," in *Companion to Feminist Studies*, ed. Nancy A. Naples (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 155–73, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119314967.ch9.

- Tramis is a French-speaking Afro-Caribbean,
- LaPensée is a Canadian-American Métis,
- Love is a Canadian from the LGBT community,
- Jayanth is a British Indian.

The diverse selection of female authors aims to move away from the typical Western cultural background. Meanwhile, I consciously chose not to focus on the already well-documented and well-argued creations of established American female designers such as Roberta Williams and Anna Anthropy (although I mention them briefly in Chapter 2).

Secondly, combining auteur theory and intersectionality allows for the empowerment of female game developers, regardless of culture and identity. The disproportionate emphasis on male developers is not necessarily due to the quality of the games, but rather influenced by (often openly misogynistic) journalistic discourses. Female auteurs/autrices have been pioneers in many aspects, such as introducing postcolonial themes to digital games (Tramis), merging game development with scholarly practices (LaPensée), rewriting Occidental colonial texts (Jayanth), or bringing queer game avant-garde into the mainstream (Love). Unfortunately, male journalists' disparagement of female developers' games often prevents the latter from gaining recognition among the frequently repeated names of male auteurs like Wright, Molyneux, Meier, etc.

Lastly, this dissertation aims to demonstrate various types of authorial discourses. There are diverse understandings of auteurs. Borrowing the terminology coined by Marta Matylda Kania, I identify four authorial discourses: *guardians of the vision* (or simply, *visionaries*), *digital orators*, *digital artisans*, and—this is my addition—*shy decision-makers*. Visionaries supervise the larger team and protect the project's vision; digital orators are individuals designing games with social activation in mind; digital artisans design games independently using available programming tools and techniques; finally, shy decision-makers act on behalf of more prominent developers, but within their competence, they contribute content that determines the significance of their entire output. Tramis, LaPensée, Love, and Jayanth are associated with these authorial discourses. Once again, I treat the auteur category contextually, not literally; the auteur need not necessarily be the sole game creator or the team's leader, but they can nevertheless contribute to the game's meaning. Through the analyses of games by Tramis, LaPensée, Love, and Jayanth, I offer a close reading of their gaming activity.

Recommended books on intersectionality include Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge's *Intersectionality* (2020).[6] Other notable works are *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History* (2016) by Ange-Marie Hancock, which delivers a thorough historical study on intersectional theoretical thought before the term was coined,[7] as well as *Introducing Intersectionality* (2017) by Mary Romero.[8]

Several key publications have influenced feminist and intersectional thought in digital games. First, one can consider reading an anthology *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (2000), edited by Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, which remains an essential work reflecting on the masculine game culture.[9] Jon Dovey and Helen Kennedy's *Game Cultures* (2006) is also advisable. Its authors provide an account of the first American female game designers and express the need to rewrite the male-dominated history of digital games.[10] Another crucial text is Laine Nooney's article "A Pedestal, A Table, A Love Letter" (2013), an anthropological study of Roberta Williams's games that explains why this female designer became gradually forgotten.[11]

Recent literature on intersectionality and digital games has expanded rapidly. Shira Chess's *Play Like a Feminist* (2020) is a recommended study on how to interpret games through the lens of feminist thought and, thus, how to reform the gaming culture through play. Moreover, Chess explicitly refers to the intersectional framework, which makes the book even more recommended.[12] *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games* (2020) by Bonnie Ruberg examines the impact of the LGBT community in digital culture over the years, taking into account the work of Christine Love, among others. *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (2020), edited by Kishonna Gray, primarily discusses the African-American gaming community and issues related to white gamers' domination. Anne Ladyem McDivitt's *Hot Tubs and Pac-Man: Gender and the Early Video Game Industry in the United States (1950s-1980s)* describes how the digital game industry in the United States became gendered from the early beginnings and how female

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6   Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2016).
7   Ange-Marie Hancock, *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).
8   Mary Romero, *Introducing Intersectionality* (Hoboken, NJ: Polity Press, 2017).
9   Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, eds., *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).
10  Jon Dovey and Helen W. Kennedy, *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media* (Maidenhead – New York: Open University Press, 2006), 82.
11  Laine Nooney, "A Pedestal, A Table, A Love Letter: Archaeologies of Gender in Videogame History," *Game Studies* 13, no. 2 (2013), http://gamestudies.org/1302/articles/nooney.
12  Shira Chess, *Play Like a Feminist* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2020), 14–15.

game developers fought for their inclusion. Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall's *Slave Revolt on Screen: The Haitian Revolution in Film and Video Games* (2021) discusses Muriel Tramis's early output, highlighting her contributions to understanding slavery and colonialism in the contemporary Caribbean. For the juvenile audience, Mary Kenney's *Gamer Girls: 25 Women who Built the Video Game Industry* (2020) serves as an introduction to intersectionality and female representation in digital games. Additionally, Anastasia Salter's biography of game designer Jane Jensen, *Gabriel Knight, Adventure Games, Hidden Objects* (2017), is a valuable read.[13]

Chapter 1 outlines the key assumptions and issues surrounding intersectionality, focusing on the debate over the concept introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw. The chapter provides a simplified understanding of the framework that combines elements of postcolonialism, feminism, and Marxism, despite the inherent tensions between these movements. This discussion on intersectionality leads to examples of underprivileged groups' involvement in information technology and digital culture.

Chapter 2 delves into the history of suppression and resistance in the field. It begins with the advent of computers and examines the challenging journey towards female emancipation in information technology, including the activities of African American females at the NACA Research Center and the underappreciated work of the ENIAC Six. The chapter discusses early digital games created by females and a brief period of emancipation (the 1980s and 1990s), followed by a severe crisis in the 2000s when female game developers were marginalized again. The chapter concludes with processes that increased the visibility of females in the industry, highlighting tensions between progressive gaming and the aggressive supporters of the GamerGate controversy.

Whereas Chapter 2 provides an overview of the historical presence of females in the industry, Chapter 3 discusses the relevance of auteur theory in relation to intersectionality. It starts by tracing the origins of the auteur category and the challenges of applying the term "auteur" without proper context. The concepts of artist and authorship have conservative roots, and their application to collective media by *Cahiers du cinéma* critics in the 1950s has been controversial. However, anti-auteurist essays by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault pushed the discussion to another extreme, prompting a critique of their texts. The chapter then explores how game authorship has been defined by Espen Aarseth, Marta Matylda Kania, and others. Finally, an

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13     Anastasia Salter, *Jane Jensen: Gabriel Knight, Adventure Games, Hidden Objects* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017).

auteur is defined as an individual or small group responsible for at least two genre-defying games, whose work exhibits emerging, self-contained meaning associated with these games, regardless of their formal position.

Chapter 4 demonstrates the practical application of intersectionality and auteur theory. Through the analysis of games created by Tramis, LaPensée, Love, and Jayanth, the chapter identifies specific characteristics of each developer's titles. By assigning the authorial categories previously discussed (visionaries, digital orators, digital artisans, shy decision-makers), the chapter showcases the relative cohesion of their works. Furthermore, it argues that auteur theory remains useful and can help legitimize female presence in the gaming industry.

# Chapter 1

# Intersectionality

In 1989, African-American lawyer Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw introduced the term "intersectonality" to a larger audience. Crenshaw's aim was more practical than theoretical, as she sought to reform the U.S. judiciary system, which discriminated against African-American females during legal cases. Crenshaw emphasized that African-American females could not find sufficient support both in the feminist theory and anti-racist policy.[1] The lawyer cited examples of cases where court hearings on racial and gender discrimination were dropped because anti-discrimination law did not address manifestations of dual harassment against females: both as women and as Blacks.[2] Crenshaw later expanded the scope of intersectionality in research about fieldwork among unemployed immigrant women of color in Los Angeles. Crenshaw underlined that immigrant women of color experienced representational, political, and structural violence; that is—through denigrating portraits in popular culture, political discrimination, and domestic abuse.[3]

Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality was never intended to be exclusive. It has been a theory in the making and a social practice. One of the most prominent theorists of intersectionality, Patricia Hill Collins, stated that the term had been a metaphor used to resist "social inequalities brought about by racism, sexism, colonialism, capitalism, and similar systems of power."[4] Since then, intersectionality has expanded to trace "interdependent social inequalities of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, ability, and age" that influence the social location

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[1] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, no. 1 (1989): 140.

[2] Ibid., 149.

[3] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Identity Politics, Intersectionality, and Violence Against Women," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1245–82.

[4] Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 27.

of particular groups and allow for addressing their problems.[5]  Intersectionality represents an attempt to reveal and eradicate discursively rooted inequalities.[6]  Thus, the intersectional approach is systemic and not reduced to individuals; it focuses on identities that "operate within and are affected by structures of power."[7]

Intersectionality lacks a precise definition, but some scholars attempt to capture its essence. Patricia Hill Collins and Silma Bilge describe it as "a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences."[8]  They assert that people's lives and the organization of power in societies are better understood as being shaped by multiple intersecting factors, such as race, gender, and class.[9]  The goal of intersectionality is to identify and examine these factors to promote social equality. Devon Carbado highlights that intersectionality enables the analysis of social processes like racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, xenophobia, nativism, ageism, ableism, and Islamophobia.[10]  Carbado notes that intersectionality typically challenges the normative white male heterosexuality, which "provides three axes—whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality—against at least one of which the rest of us [underprivileged groups] are intersectionally differentiated."[11]

## 1.1  Intersectionality's Roots

Intersectionality as a social practice predates Crenshaw's article. African-American feminists trace its beginnings to the origins of Black feminist histories, including the abolitionist movement in the 19th-century United States. The harsh reality of Southern American slavery before the American Civil War, and the continued persecution of African-Americans after the conflict, led some African-American females to protest against racial and social inequality.

For example, Maria Miller Stewart complained that African-American females had to "bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles," one of the first Black female

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[5]     Ibid., 44.
[6]     Julia S. Jordan-Zachery, "Am I a Black Woman or a Woman Who Is Black? A Few Thoughts on the Meaning of Intersectionality," *Politics & Gender* 3, no. 02 (June 2007): 256.
[7]     April L. Few-Demo, "Intersectionality as the 'New' Critical Approach in Feminist Family Studies: Evolving Racial/Ethnic Feminisms and Critical Race Theories," *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 6, no. 2 (2014): 170, https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12039.
[8]     Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 2.
[9]     Ibid.
[10]    Devon W Carbado, "Colorblind Intersectionality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 4 (2013): 815.
[11]    Ibid., 818.

criticism of patriarchy.[12] Stewart thought not only about race and gender but also about class; she argued that Black females' work was exploited by white male enslavers.[13] Harriet Jacobs, in turn, shared her horrific experiences of being repeatedly raped by her master. Jacobs indicated substantial differences between the lives of white females and Black enslaved females—the latter were not lawfully protected from rape and mutilation.[14] Likewise, Anna Julia Cooper recounted that, unlike white females, the status of colored females was "one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make for our civilization."[15] In a similar vein, Ida B. Wills-Barnett exposed the logic of the "Myth of the Black Male Rapist"—commonplace accusations against African-American males that they reportedly raped white females—and stood in solidarity with African-American males who were lynched due to fake slanders: "Lynching was merely an excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized and 'keep the nigger down'."[16] Wills-Barnett raised the question of structural persecution that African-Americans faced even safter the abolition of slavery, via Jim Crow laws.[17]

African-American females in the United States were early proponents of intersectional thinking, recognizing that they faced harassment due to both their sex and skin color. They also expressed solidarity with African-American men to some extent. In the 20th century, many resisted white-imposed capitalism[18] and joined Communist organizations. One such individual, Louise Thompson, described the plight of Black females as being subject to "triple exploitation—as workers, as women, and as Negroes."[19]

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[12]   Maria W. Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which Me Must Build," in *Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart* (1831; repr., Washington: Enterprise Publishing Company, 1879), 32, https://books.google.com?id=CsZxAAAAMAAJ.

[13]   Ashley J. Bohrer, *Marxism and Intersectionality* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2019), 37, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839441602.

[14]   Harriet Ann Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861; repr., New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005), 34–37.

[15]   Anna J. Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (1892; repr., New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), 134.

[16]   Cf. Jacqueline Jones Royster, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida b. Wells, 1892-1900* (New York, NY: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016), 3.

[17]   The Jim Crow laws, enforced by Southern Democrats until 1965, held back African Americans' constitutional rights. Racial segregation and the emergence of white supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, led to massacres of Black people. The most infamous massacre occurred in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921, when Whites killed up to 300 African Americans, while allegedly avenging the rape of a white woman. See Leslie Vincent Tischauser, *Jim Crow Laws* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2012); Anne Wallace Sharp, *A Dream Deferred: The Jim Crow Era*, Lucent Library of Black History (Detroit: Lucent Books, 2005), pp. 55-70; Randy Krehbiel, *Tulsa, 1921: Reporting a Massacre* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019), p. 88.

[18]   As many worked underpaid for the white capitalists, see Bohrer, *Marxism and Intersectionality*, 171–72.

[19]   Louise Thompson Patterson, "Toward a Brighter Dawn," *Viewpoint Magazine*, October 31, 2015, https://archive.is/RflOP.

The intersectional framework can also be traced back to the Third World Liberation movements of the late 1960s and 1970s.[20] Towards the end of the decade, female Native American, Chicano, Asian American, and African-American students in the United States formed Third World Liberation Fronts to protest against aggressive policing and systemic racism.[21] The Third World Liberation aimed to "stand together in the fight for educational freedom in this racist society."[22] The subsequent Third World Women's Alliance (1968–1980), founded afterwards, accused white females of perpetuating racist attitudes towards women of color[23] and only representing middle-class females' interests.[24] Mentioning the Third World Liberation movements is essential, as they significantly contributed to advancing the rights of underprivileged groups in the United States.[25] These movements coined the term "sexual racism," referring to victimization based on both gender and ethnicity.[26] Another influential group, The Combahee River Collective (CRC), introduced "heterosexism" in their "Black Feminist Statement" to describe discrimination based on sexual orientation.[27] Furthermore, the CRC emphasized the necessity of integrating gender, race, class, and sexuality to any "feminist analysis of power

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[20]   I use the term "Third World" not in a derogatory sense; the Third World Liberation movements were self-labeling in a positive way, before the term became pejorative in use.

[21]   Van Gosse, *The Movements of the New Left, 1950-1975: A Brief History with Documents*, The Bedford Series in History and Culture (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 27–29.

[22]   Ibid., 128.

[23]   One can find examples of white feminists' racist behaviors in texts by Shulamith Firestone and Mary Daly. Firestone claimed that racism is simply an extension of sexism. Thus, instead of supporting their civil rights movements led by male communities and still exposing themselves to sexual abuse, women of color should join white females in struggles against men (Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Batham Book, 1970), 108). Daly argued that the dominance of sexism and patriarchy is profound for the whole world, as evidenced by Western cultures and other regions. Daly cites the example of female circumcision practiced in Africa, which she labels as "barbaric" regardless of cultural background (Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 154). Margaret A. Simons' article critiques white feminists' thought. Simons pointed out Firestone's hardly concealed and outrageous racism (Margaret A. Simons, "Racism and Feminism: A Schism in the Sisterhood," *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 2 (1979): 393–94, https://doi.org/10.2307/3177603). For example, Firestone labeled white females in the human family as "Wives" but compared Black women to "Whores" and Black men to "Pimps," subservient to the white men but contemptuous to Black females (Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 114, 124). Simons also accuses Daly that she "offers no adequate support for her position that sexism is the primary form of oppression… Sexism is certainly an important model and source of oppression, but not the only one. Sexism alone does also not provide an adequate explanation for genocide and war, as Daly asserts" (Simons, "Racism and Feminism," 395–96).

[24]   Gosse, *The Movements of the New Left, 1950-1975*, 133.

[25]   Ibid., 28–30.

[26]   Anna Nieto-Gómez, "La Femenista," in *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*, ed. Alma M. Garcia (New York: Routledge, 1997), 86–87.

[27]   Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 3/4 (2014): 272.

and domination."[28] Thus, what ultimately became known as intersectionality has its roots in the protests against sexual racism and heterosexism in the 1960s and 1970s.

Before the term intersectionality emerged, Alice Walker proposed the concept of "womanism" was an alternative to white-dominated liberal feminism. Womanism referred to the "black feminists" or "feminists of color"[29] and offered a more inclusive perspective. Patricia Hill Collins, commenting on Walker's work, explained that many Black females saw feminism as a movement exclusively for females or, at worst, as anti-male.[30] This type of feminism was foreign to African American activists who defended African American men's rights, despite the latters' sexism. However, Walker also offered another definition of womanism: one that envisions a diverse and multicolored world like "a flower garden, with every color flower represented."[31] According to Walker, a womanist is committed to "the survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female."[32] However, this universalist thought requires the traditional male models (dominators, killers, hypocrites) to develop not to treat females as sexual objects but as sisters.[33] African-American scholar Audre Lorde emphasized in a similar tone the need to gather various discriminated groups and eradicate "the virulent hatred leveled against all women, people of Color, Lesbians and gay men, poor people—against all of us who are seeking to examine the particulars of our lives."[34] Such defined, womanism is believed to having influenced intersectionality as well.[35]

Intersectionality's roots can also be traced to the concept of "global feminism," coined by Nilüfer Cagatay, Caren Grown, and Aida Santiago at the Nairobi Women's Conference.[36] The panelists observed that while females were becoming a potential global force, the world remained divided by profound social, political, and economic inequalities and hierarchies.[37]

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[28] Kathy Davis, "Intersectionality as Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful," *Feminist Theory* 9, no. 1 (2008): 72–73, https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700108086364.

[29] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi.

[30] Patricia Hill Collins, "What's in a Name?" *The Black Scholar* 26, no. 1 (1996): 11, https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1996.11430765.

[31] Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, xi.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid., 330–31.

[34] Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 1/2 (1997): 281.

[35] Jennifer Christine Nash, "Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality," *Meridians* 11, no. 2 (2011): 11, https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.11.2.1; Rose M. Brewer, "Black Feminism and Womanism," in *Companion to Feminist Studies*, ed. Nancy A. Naples, 1st ed. (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), 91, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119314967.ch6.

[36] Nilufer Cagatay, Caren Grown, and Aida Santiago, "The Nairobi Women's Conference: Toward a Global Feminism?" *Feminist Studies* 12, no. 2 (1986): 401–12, https://doi.org/10.2307/3177975.

[37] Ibid., 409.

Global feminism emphasized the recognition of women's rights as part of general human rights and aimed to promote females' achievements in "interrelated areas of political, civil, economic, social, and cultural rights."[38]

The outlined roots of intersectionality are not exhaustive, but they demonstrate the presence of intersectional thinking in various earlier movements aimed at liberating overlapping groups. Black feminist thought advocated for the rights of both African-American females and males, Third World Liberation movements involved diverse national groups, and womanism/global feminism sought to improve the lives of all people. However, intersectional thought post-1980s has become increasingly whitewashed and diluted, necessitating an examination of its potential shortcomings.

## 1.2  Criticism of Intersectionality

Some critics argue that intersectionality has overshadowed Black feminist thought and Third World Liberation movements.[39] According to Sara Salem, "intersectionality has now become one of the dominant ways of doing feminist research, and in that process has been stretched to include many different ontologies that are often in conflict with one another."[40] Intersectionality has become synonymous with feminism, more often labeled as feminist theory than a metaphor,[41] promoting a "liberal, 'all-inclusive' feminism"[42] that contrasts with the structural Marxist ontology at the core of Black feminist thought.[43]

The argument against intersectionality as a theory has been paradoxically fueled by Nina Lykke's ambiguous claim that intersectionality first appeared in the 1970s works of European feminists.[44] Criticizing bell hooks's genealogy of intersectionality, Lykke argued that European

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[38]  Elisabeth Friedman, "Women's Human Rights: The Emergence of a Movement," in *Women's Rights, Human Rights: International Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Julie Peters and Andrea Wolper (London: Routledge, 1995), 19.

[39]  Sara Salem, "Intersectionality and Its Discontents: Intersectionality as Traveling Theory," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 25, no. 4 (2018): 406, https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506816643999.

[40]  Ibid.

[41]  Maria Carbin and Sara Edenheim, "The Intersectional Turn in Feminist Theory: A Dream of a Common Language?" *European Journal of Women's Studies* 20, no. 3 (2013): 245, https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506813484723.

[42]  Ibid., 213.

[43]  Kathy Davis, "Who Owns Intersectionality? Some Reflections on Feminist Debates on How Theories Travel," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 27, no. 2 (2020): 114, https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506819892659; Carbin and Edenheim, "The Intersectional Turn in Feminist Theory," 213.

[44]  Nina Lykke, "Nya perspektiv på intersektionalitet. Problem och möjligheter," *Tidskrift för genusvetenskap*, no. 2-3 (2005): 9.

feminists were the ones who practiced it. However, according to Paulina de los Reyes and Diana Mulinari, such a Eurocentric view diminishes "the theoretical contribution of Black feminist thought and the specific historical conditions in which it has emerged."[45] Salem also contends that Lykke's argument leads to the whitewashing of intersectionality and erasure of its Black feminist and Third World Liberation movement roots.[46] Critical voices like those of Salem, Reyes, and Mulinari emphasize that intersectionality cannot be disconnected from the previous achievements of Black and Third World feminist movements, while also acknowledging that it cannot focus solely on Black females.

For example, Jennifer C. Nash pointed out that Black females, often seen by Crenshaw and her followers as victims, do differ among themselves—for instance, in terms of class and sexual orientation.[47] According to Nash, there is also a dilemma that intersectional scholars still need to address: "whether *all* identities are intersectional or whether only multiply marginalized subjects have an intersectional identity."[48] The first statement leads to the paradox mentioned by Salem; if intersectionality covers all people, whom does it actually protect? Considering Nash's argument, it may be more appropriate to choose the second option: identifying multiple marginalization of subjects as the pivotal element of intersectionality.

Intersectionality has also faced criticism from conservatives who feel targeted by the concept. As *Vox* journalist Jane Coaston observed, some argue that intersectionality has made being a white, straight, cisgender male undesirable.[49] However, it is important to note that white, straight, cisgender males still constitute the most privileged group worldwide, even though they too have differences among themselves.[50] These individuals tend to maintain their privileges while positioning themselves as subordinate, which is why intersectionality does not primarily focus on them.

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[45]    Paulina de los Reyes and Diana Mulinari, "Hegemonic Feminism Revisited: On the Promises of Intersectionality in Times of the Precarisation of Life," *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 28, no. 3 (2020): 188, https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2019.1705905.

[46]    Salem, "Intersectionality and Its Discontents," 406.

[47]    Jennifer Christine Nash, "Re-Thinking Intersectionality," *Feminist Review* 89, no. 1 (June 2008): 12, https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2008.4.

[48]    Ibid., 9.

[49]    Jane Coaston, "Intersectionality, Explained: Meet Kimberlé Crenshaw, Who Coined the Term," *Vox*, May 28, 2019, https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/5/20/18542843/intersectionality-conservatism-law-race-gender-discrimination.

[50]    Douglas Schrock and Michael Schwalbe, "Men, Masculinity, and Manhood Acts," *Annual Review of Sociology* 35, no. 1 (2009): 284–89, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-115933; Kjerstin Gruys and Christin L. Munsch, "'Not Your Average Nerd': Masculinities, Privilege, and Academic Effort at an Elite University," *Sociological Forum* 35, no. 2 (2020): 3, https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12585.

Despite the concerns mentioned above, intersectionality can still be useful as a framework for identifying multi-faceted and nuanced forms of social inequality, as long as it is not treated solely as another branch of liberal feminism. Kathy Davis explains the potential advantages of using intersectionality in scholarly practice:

> Intersectionality initiates a process of discovery, alerting us to the fact that the world around us is always more complicated and contradictory than we ever could have anticipated. It compels us to grapple with this complexity in our scholarship. It does not provide written-in-stone guidelines for doing feminist inquiry, a kind of feminist methodology to fit all kinds of feminist research. Rather, it stimulates our creativity in looking for new and often unorthodox ways of doing feminist analysis… It encourages complexity, stimulates creativity, and avoids premature closure, tantalizing feminist scholars to raise new questions and explore uncharted territory.[51]

In Davis's view, intersectionality is inherently subject to constant reworking and contextual application. Therefore, for this dissertation, I will adopt a simplified understanding of intersectionality. By using an intersectional approach, I will focus on its most frequently discussed categories: race, gender, sexuality, and class; specifically, I will emphasize their influence on individuals and social groups' agency. To illustrate the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, I will use examples that problematize these categories.

## 1.3  Intersectionality and Its Main Concerns

### 1.3.1  Intersectionality and the Question of Race and Ethnicity

Intersectionality emerged from the anti-racism movement, but that does not mean it focuses exclusively on people of color. The issue of skin color, often stereotypically attributed to race, sparks controversy. European scholars constructed the concept of race to legitimize the colonial conquest of non-Western nations. Western European nations have benefited from colonial expansion, acquiring raw materials, farmland, and forced labor, justifying their conquests with a racist scientific discourse. Homi Bhabha refers to this as the colonial discourse, "the

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[51]    Davis, "Intersectionality as Buzzword," 79.

apparatus that turns on the recognition and disavowal of racial/cultural/historical differences."[52] Consequently, racialization involves creating predominantly artificial distinctions.

African-Americans and African Caribbeans attempted to counter white racism with its mirror reflection: *négritude*. *Négritude* promoted solidarity with Black ancestors from Africa and all African who shared heritage with African descendants. Its seminal work was W.E.B. Du Bois's essay *The Souls of Black Folk*, but the movement became associated with the works of Martinican writers such as Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Frantz Fanon.[53] However, the concept of *négritude*, enthusiastically summarized by Jean-Paul Sartre as "anti-racist racism,"[54] faced criticism for its essentialist tendencies.

Martinican thinker Édouard Glissant, along with his students Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé, and Raphaël Confiant,[55] claimed that a homogeneous African culture does not exist. Glissant popularized the term "creolization" (*créolisation*), reflecting the past and present of Caribbean populations. According to Glissant, as the Caribbean countries experienced traumatic events related to colonialism and slavery, people of different nations, complexions, and traditions eventually learned to live side by side. However, creolization does not signify the loss of one's identity but cohabitation with others, as Glissant summarizes: "Je change, par échanger avec l'autre, sans me perdre pourtant ni me dénaturer."[56] Creolization may involve forming mixed families (which historically has occurred) but is not limited to "cross-breeding" (*métissage*).[57] For Glissant, there is no singular African culture; instead, there are "poetics of Relation" to Africa that can be nurtured, such as the historical suffering of Africans, the troubled past of Martinique, and shared knowledge of the world.[58] As an alternative to "continental thinking" (*la pensée continentale*), which, with its universalism, resembles the metaphor of a large world block, Glissant suggests "thinking with archipelagos" (*la pensée archipélique*): the fluidity of thought movement, like a river current or seawater.[59]

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[52] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London – New York: Routledge, 1994), 84.

[53] Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939; repr., Paris: Présence Africaine, 1995); Léopold Sédar Senghor, ed., *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1969); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (1952; repr., London: Pluto Press, 2008); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; repr., New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003).

[54] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Black Orpheus," trans. John MacCombie, *The Massachusetts Review* 6, no. 1 (1964): 48, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25087216.

[55] Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, "In Praise of Creoleness," trans. Mohamed B Taleb Khyar, *Callaloo* 13, no. 4 (1990): 886–909, https://doi.org/10.2307/2931390.

[56] Édouard Glissant, *Philosophie de la Relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 66.

[57] Ibid., 64.

[58] Ibid., 131.

[59] Ibid., 45.

Chamoiseau, Bernabé, and Confiant popularized the term *créolité* ("creoleness"), which means "the interactional or transactional aggregate of Caribbean, European, African, Asian, and Levantine cultural elements, united on the same soil by the yoke of history."[60] *Créolité* was intended as "an annihilation of false universality, of monolingualism, and of purity," and thus as resistance to the Western cultural influences without forming a unified Black culture.[61] British-Jamaican scholar Stuart Hall further emphasized that the mixture of cultures makes it impossible for African Caribbeans to speak "about one experience, one identity."[62] Afro-Caribbean people belong to the diaspora, understood as "recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity," an arena for people "living with and through, not despite, difference."[63]

Afro-British cultural scholar Paul Gilroy rejected even the entire category of "race," seeing it as a social construct that manifests through "the lazy, casual invocation of cultural insiderism."[64] He also criticized African-American thinkers linked to British cultural studies for embracing "volkish popular cultural nationalism."[65] Gilroy faulted African-American scholars for underestimating the Black right-wing nationalism (e.g., the music of Neo-nationalist 2 Live Crew) and tribal wars in Africa (e.g., the 1994 homicide in Rwanda). Moreover, Gilroy argued that African-American scholars contributed to the rise of Neo-Fascism. In his view (drawing from Theodor Adorno), 1920s Black jazz advanced the Nazi movement in Europe. He suggested that progressive African American movements could lead to a renewed racist backlash.[66]

Gilroy's rejection of "race" was criticized for placing the blame on the Black diaspora for perpetuating Neo-Fascism, rather than targeting white supremacists who have historically manifested Fascism most prominently.[67] Nevertheless, essentialist racial divisions that *négritude* enforced—even within the contemporary Afro-centric movement—have proven difficult to defend, as demonstrated by Clarence Earl Walker[68] and Algernon Austin. Austin asserts that

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60    Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, "In Praise of Creoleness," 891.
61    Ibid., 892.
62    Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (1993; repr., London – New York: Routledge, 2013), 404.
63    Ibid., 401–2.
64    Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 32.
65    Ibid., 15.
66    Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 294–96.
67    Molefi Kete Asante, "Afrocentricity and the Eurocentric Hegemony of Knowledge: Contradictions of Place," in *Race and the Foundations of Knowledge: Cultural Amnesia in the Academy*, ed. Joseph A. Young and Jana Evans Braziel (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 152.
68    Clarence Earl Walker, *We Can't Go Home Again: An Argument About Afrocentrism* (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

race is a "multidimensional phenomenon," comprising three dimensions: racial ideology, racial identity, and racial-social structures.[69] The meaning of "race" changes over time, based on an individual's physical appearance, ancestry, geography, and culture; thus, skin color alone does not define race.[70]

The race category raises concerns for identities beyond just Black ones. Race has often been linked to ethnicity. For example, Ashkenazi Jews, until the outbreak of World War II, were excluded from the "white race", and the Nazi movement used the "achievements" of physiognomy to murder millions of people of Jewish descent.[71] However, some Ashkenazi Jews have identified themselves both as "Whites" or "people of color", which complicates their privileged/underprivileged status.[72] Furthermore, in Israel, the Jewish settlers' hostility against Palestinian communities has been openly racialized; many Israeli scholars and politicians have benefited from their anti-Arab "white privilege" while simultaneously identifying themselves as "people of color" and curiously denouncing intersectionality as "anti-Semitic."[73]

It is crucial to note that victims of racism can also harbor racist attitudes towards other nations. To illustrate this problem with a non-Western example, I will use the Chinese case. Undeniably, Western and Japanese racism deeply impacted Chinese history; China faced brutal European exploitation after the Opium War, and during World War II, the Chinese were massively murdered by the Japanese Army. However, since the 1980s, the Chinese have developed their own racist ideology, targeted against Africans,[74] as the People's Republic of China has been expanding its influence in Africa (including settlement). Yinghong Cheng recounts the example of Lou Jing, a girl born of a mixed relationship between a Chinese woman and an African American, who became the victim of racial slurs on the Chinese internet after participating in a Chinese talent show.[75]

In summary, racial discourses intersect with each other. Factors such as human interrelations, geographical location, and historical past can affect the definition of "race" and mutual racial

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[69]    Algernon Austin, *Achieving Blackness: Race, Black Nationalism, and Afrocentrism in the Twentieth Century*, e-book (New York: NYU Press, 2006), pt. 33/306.

[70]    Ibid., pts. 22–32/306.

[71]    Warren J. Blumenfeld, "Outside/Inside/Between Sides: An Investigation of Ashkenazi Jewish Perceptions on Their "Race"," *Multicultural Perspectives* 8, no. 3 (2006): 11, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327892mcp0803_3.

[72]    Ibid., 13–17.

[73]    Michael R. Fischbach, "What Color Are Israeli," in *Blackness in Israel: Rethinking Racial Boundaries*, ed. Uri Dorchin and Gabriella Djerrahian (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 241–48, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003111702-18.

[74]    Yinghong Cheng, "From Campus Racism to Cyber Racism: Discourse of Race and Chinese Nationalism," *China Quarterly* 207 (2011): 562, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741011000658.

[75]    Ibid., 567.

animosity between nations or people of different skin colors. Thus, race is constantly evolving. However, it is not the only primary category that helps in understanding intersectionality.

## 1.3.2 Intersectionality and Class

The intersectional critique of both racism and sexism also overlaps with the class category. I will cite an example of Indian female scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Spivak relied on Jacques Derrida's deconstruction method, which she defined in her translation of Derrida's work *Of Grammatology* as "showing the text what it 'does not know'."[76] Deconstruction served Spivak in demonstrating how European imperialism still influences feminist and postcolonial thought. Based on her personal experience as an upper-class woman exploring French-language feminist thought, Spivak showed how Western feminists had been disconnected from the problems of so-called "Third World" women and had formed an intellectual sect:

> How… can one learn from and speak to the millions of illiterate rural and urban Indian women who live "in the pores of" capitalism, inaccessible to the capitalist dynamics that allow us our shared channels of communication, the definition of common [male] enemies?… The point is that I am trying to make is that, in order to learn enough about Third World women and to develop a different readership, the immense heterogeneity of the field must be appreciated, and the First World feminist must learn to stop feeling privileged as a *woman*.[77]

In a later text directed against English-speaking Western feminists, Spivak argued that reclaiming British cultural texts such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* is futile. The imperial roots of these novels cannot be ignored, regardless of their writers' gender.[78] Spivak's influential essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, was also a critique of the sovereign subject's death, proclaimed by post-structuralist male philosophers like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari.[79] Spivak argued that Foucault, Deleuze, and

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[76] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), lxxvii.

[77] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "French Feminism in an International Frame," *Yale French Studies*, no. 62 (1981): 157.

[78] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 257.

[79] See for example Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

Guattari attacked the idea of human subjectivity without considering the "Third World," whose representatives desperately needed the subjectivity stifled by centuries of colonialism.[80] Spivak addressed the crucial problem of females' dual oppression—racial (colonial) and sexual—by illustrating the issue of female representation. This manifested in the discussion around the Bengali *suttee* ritual, banned by British colonial authorities in India in 1829. This ban was part of the so-called civilizing mission in British colonial discourse, ironically summarized by Spivak as: "White men are saving brown women from brown men."[81] However, British propaganda purposely omitted the ban's ideological premise: "in Bengal, unlike elsewhere in India, widows could inherit property. Thus, what the British see as poor victimized women going to the slaughter is in fact an ideological battleground."[82]

Spivak points out that the oft-repeated white British mantra about defending Bengali females from the local "barbaric" ritual serves to whitewash colonial oppression.[83] However, Spivak does not intend to protect the Bengali males who subjected females to gender-motivated oppression and class exploitation through the *suttee* ritual. Indeed, Bengali females were to be kept needy and dependent on males for their livelihood, which colonial propaganda no longer emphasized. Above all, the discussion of subjectivity comes at the expense of the Bengali females for whom "someone" is speaking; they cannot speak for themselves in everyday scholarly discourse due to educational, economic, and class barriers.

Another influential thinker who practiced intersectional thought by indicating the class roots of systemic racism was African-American philosopher bell hooks. Hooks has been credited with introducing the term "white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy."[84] This form of dominance, exemplified in the United States, intersects on many levels. During her academic career, hooks observed that white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is maintained by numerous social groups with seemingly conflicting interests. For example, white women's liberationists such as Betty Friedan expressed class-motivated hostility against African-American females,[85] while some wealthy Black conservatives tried to silence protests against white supremacy for fear of losing their privileges.[86] In her *Feminist Theory*, bell hooks noted that being oppressed "means *the*

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[80] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), 274.
[81] Ibid., 297.
[82] Ibid., 300.
[83] Ibid., 298.
[84] Bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt; Company, 1995), 29.
[85] Bell hooks, "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination," in *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Ruth Frankenberg (New York: Duke University Press, 1997), 345–46.
[86] Hooks, *Killing Rage*, 29.

*absence of choices*."[87]  People who *have* some choices tend to ignore the exploitation of those who are actually oppressed, even if they belong to the same social group. Capitalism structures patriarchy (and other systems of oppression as well) and moderates the behavior of social groups, granting freedom or limitation in certain spheres.[88]  Thus, hooks advocated for intersectional thought needed to overcome systemic discrimination:

> Either/or thinking is crucial to the maintenance of racism and other forms of group oppression.  Whenever we think in terms of both/and we are better situated to do the work of community building.[89]

### 1.3.3  Does Intersectionality Also Apply to Males?

Despite criticizing white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, hooks left space for accepting progressive male movements. She indicated that progressive gay and straight males, although taught to abuse females,[90] can learn to contain patriarchal behaviors and join females to abolish capitalism.[91]  Hooks's remark is valuable because the inclusion of males into intersectional thought is still a controversial topic.  Males are commonly seen as the privileged gender. Nevertheless, research conducted by Bethany M. Coston and Michael Kimmel proved that "privilege is not monolithic… Among members of one privileged class, other mechanisms of marginalization may mute or reduce privilege based on another status."[92]  Coston and Kimmel's

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[87]  Bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (New York: South End Press, 1984), 4.
[88]  Ibid.
[89]  Hooks, *Killing Rage*, 37.
[90]  Such violence also concerns males of the same skin color. Manning Marable writes: "The superexploitation of Black women became a permanent feature in American social and economic life, because sisters were assaulted simultaneously as workers, as Blacks, and as women.  This triple oppression escaped Black males entirely" (Manning Marable, "Groundings with My Sisters: Patriarchy and the Exploitation of Black Women," in *Traps:  African American Men on Gender and Sexuality*, ed.  Rudolph P. Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (1983; repr., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 120). Nevertheless, as Angela Yvonne Davis stressed, during slavery in North America, "men, women and children were all 'providers' for the slaveholding class" (Angela Yvonne Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (1981; repr., London: Women's Press, 2001), 8). However, females suffered the most due to physical exploitation and sexual harassment (Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, 10–11). Rape, according to Davis, is a universal "institutionalized ingredient of the aggression" that forces females to stay passive and weak (Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, 24). However, Davis's criticism draws similarities between slavery in North America and U.S. war crimes during the Vietnam War, and thus she achieves a universal dimension. Democratic countries such as the United States achieved their geopolitical position by subjugating men of color and raping women of color.
[91]  Bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria Books, 2004), 117.
[92]  Bethany M. Coston and Michael Kimmel, "Seeing Privilege Where It Isn't: Marginalized Masculinities and the Intersectionality of Privilege," *Journal of Social Issues* 68, no. 1 (2012): 109, https://doi.org/10.1111/j. 1540-4560.2011.01738.x.

account of marginalized gay, disabled, or working-class males indicates that "manhood" itself remains a socially constructed category.

Although I mentioned before that intersectionality does not typically cover white straight, cisgender males, this statement also does not mean that males cannot be included in the intersectional approach. In some cases, they have been even more penalized than females. I will once again resort to the example of the United States. In 2017, sociologists Darrell Steffensmeier, Noah Painter-Davis, and Jeffery Ulmer conducted research that indicated the correlations between race, ethnicity, gender, and age. Based on criminal punishment statistics in the state of Pennsylvania, the researchers noticed that Black and Hispanic young males faced the harshest sentences. In contrast, regardless of race and ethnicity, young females were the least incarcerated groups.[93]

Black males are criminalized not only in the United States, though. Sharon Walker, in her research, emphasized that the issue concerns British-Caribbean males in the United Kingdom as well. A racist view persists that Black males are especially—even genetically—aggressive, which fuels their persecution by police. Meanwhile, as Walker noted in their examples, British-Caribbean males—due to systemic discrimination—fall victim to mental illnesses such as schizophrenia. "The construction of the Black man as 'big, bad and dangerous' is not only dehumanising, but creates the risk of overuse of force when those who have the power to retrain is seeing a vulnerable and mentally ill man as a threat."[94]

Some scholars argue that even if intersectional feminism had excluded males due to their patriarchal oppression against females and non-binary individuals, patriarchy itself would not have vanished. For example, Alexandra Snipes and Cas Mudde, using the example of French female populist radical right-wing politician Marine Le Pen, emphasized conservative females' role in contemporary politics. Le Pen, benefiting from her gender, proclaims populist, anti-immigration slogans, stereotypically labeled as masculine. These slogans paradoxically have given her more media attention than left-wing or unbiased female politicians.[95] Thus, just like males, females

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[93] Darrell Steffensmeier, Noah Painter-Davis, and Jeffery Ulmer, "Intersectionality of Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Age on Criminal Punishment," *Sociological Perspectives* 60, no. 4 (2017): 810–33, https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121416679371.

[94] Sharon Walker, "Systemic Racism: Big, Black, Mad and Dangerous in the Criminal Justice System," in *The International Handbook of Black Community Mental Health*, ed. Richard J. Major, Karen Carberry, and Theodore S. Ransaw (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2020), 46, https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83909-964-920201004.

[95] Alexandra Snipes and Cas Mudde, "'France's (Kinder, Gentler) Extremist': Marine Le Pen, Intersectionality, and Media Framing of Female Populist Radical Right Leaders," *Politics & Gender* 16, no. 2 (2020): 464, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X19000370.

"are not a monolith, and their political representations are a reflection of their overlapping identities."[96] Daria Colella even writes about the phenomenon of "femonationalism,"[97] evident in the example of Giorgia Meloni, leader of the nationalist Italian party Fratelli d'Italia, who became Italy's first female Prime Minister.[98] Cotella observes that Meloni's anti-immigrant and traditionalist rhetoric "wipes out years of women's struggles for equality and against oppression and… fuels opposition to gender equality while claiming to promote women's rights."[99] The paradoxical conclusions are that females may adopt stereotypically masculine values, whether positive or negative, which may result in their support for conservative governments and create several issues within feminism as a unified movement.[100]

## 1.4  Conclusion

The discussion above has shown that intersectionality faces diverse dilemmas related to tensions between race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and other categories not extensively discussed here. However, to simplify, the intersectional approach aims to reduce institutional barriers hindering the lives of various underprivileged social groups. As I mentioned, intersectionality had its predecessors in numerous social movements, including Black feminism, Third World Liberation movements, and womanism. Still, it goes beyond "Blackness/Whiteness" categories and functions as an axis depicting multifaceted patterns of discrimination.

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[96] Ibid.

[97] Daria Colella, "Femonationalism and anti-gender backlash: the instrumental use of gender equality in the nationalist discourse of the Fratelli d'Italia party," *Gender & Development* 29, no. 2-3 (2021): 269–89, https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2021.1978749.

[98] Euronews, "Italy's New Rightist PM Meloni Gets 'Cordial' Vatican Audience" (Euronews, January 11, 2023), https://www.euronews.com/2023/01/11/pope-meloni.

[99] Colella, "Femonationalism and anti-gender backlash: the instrumental use of gender equality in the nationalist discourse of the Fratelli d'Italia party," 280.

[100] Worth mentioning is Susan Sontag's 1975 influential essay "Fascinating Fascism", where she documented how Adolf Hitler's chief female film propagandist, Leni Riefenstahl, came to be counted in the 1970s as a feminist in mainstream media just because she was a woman: Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," *The New York Review of Books*, February 6, 1975, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1975/02/06/fascinating-fascism/. Similarly ambiguous are the debates about Russian-American libertarian Ayn Rand, who is, on the one hand, praised for her apologia for nonconformism and figures of strong women, while on the other—because she glorified selfishness and social inequality—blamed as an ideological basis for neoliberal thought in the United States; from Rand's books, for example, Donald Trump's staff drew inspiration. Compare Mimi Riesel Gladstein and Chris M. Sciabarra, eds., *Feminist Interpretations of Ayn Rand* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999); Lisa Duggan, *Mean Girl: Ayn Rand and the Culture of Greed* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), pp. 77-90.

Nonetheless, my research focuses mainly, but broadly, on females. Regarding Spivak's criticism of poststructural male philosophers (Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari) who denied human subjectivity without consulting females, I will return to that criticism in Chapter 3. First, however, I will demonstrate that intersectionality is a robust framework for researching the unprivileged groups in information technology and digital game development. The examples of such participation will constitute the topic of Chapter 2.

# Chapter 2

# Intersectional Approach to Digital Games: A Historical Overview

In this chapter, I aim to provide a historical overview of the female presence in the digital games industry. This is not an exhaustive study; rather, it primarily highlights that females have been involved in computing and games since the dawn of information technology. Furthermore, this chapter attempts to explore why public perception may suggest otherwise. Female involvement in gaming does not begin with the GamerGate controversy. In fact, females have been part of computing relatively early on, and some faced subjugation not only due to their gender but also because they belonged to other non-normative social categories. As I will demonstrate, this subjugation was not necessarily *physical* but rather *institutional*. Female developers faced opposition not only from their male colleagues but also from aggressive and mocking male reviewers in gaming magazines, and of course, male gamers who acted discursively against them.

## 2.1  Prologue: Female Presence in Information Technology

The first female programmer (or programmer in general) was Ada Lovelace. She improved upon Charles Babbage's analytical engine design, which only existed on paper at the time and was underestimated by her contemporaries. The design did not come to fruition in her lifetime. However, it was Lovelace who explained the technicalities of Babbage's design and understood its potential impact on the world: "The Analytical Engine weaves algebraic

patterns just as the Jacquard loom weaves flowers and leaves."[1] What is less obvious is that even before the first computing machines known as computers existed, females were involved in computing *en masse* long before Lovelace's vision could come true. Since 1892, females skilled in computational work were employed as *computers* (a job name) to operate telephone exchanges, maintain records, and work as shorthand typists.[2]

However, an even lesser-known fact is the presence of Black females in the computer industry. In the 1940s, when the first computers were built in the United States, African-American females were hired to operate them. For example, Rowena Becker ended up at the NACA Research Center in Virginia because her initial choice to be a chemist was impossible due to racial segregation.[3] Other African American females employed by NACA—Kathryn Peddrew, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson—were moved to a separate unit for Black female workers, where segregation persisted. Indeed, even lunches and lodging were separate from white employees.[4] As pioneers of computing during World War II, females hired as computers gained the opportunity for partial liberation (as their husbands fought on the front lines) and made important achievements in simplifying the computing process. British woman Grace Hopper serves as an example. In 1944, Hopper invented "snippets" for the Mark I, the mechanical computer, making it unnecessary to type the same code pieces repeatedly.[5]

However, as the conflict died, computers' social status deteriorated, and those females became marginalized. For example, six females who worked on the ENIAC electronic computer (Kathleen McNulty, Betty Jean Jennings, Elizabeth Snyder, Marlyn Wescoff, Frances Bilas, and Ruth Lichterman) were not given credit at all for programming the pioneering demonstration program.[6] Moreover, the so-called ENIAC Six was even cut out of War Department publicity photos. Snyder commented bitterly: "I wasn't photogenic. I wasn't included on any of the pictures of the entire stupid thing". McNulty also claimed: "None of us were ever introduced [at the press conference]; we were just programmers."[7] The marginalization of females in the

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[1]    Cf. Claire Lisa Evans, *Broad Band: The Untold Story of the Women Who Made the Internet* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), para. 7.36.

[2]    Ibid., paras. 7.1–7.4.

[3]    Beverly E. Golemba, "Human Computers: The Women in Aeronautical Research" (NASA, 1994), 17–18, https://crgis.ndc.nasa.gov/crgis/images/c/c7/Golemba.pdf.

[4]    Ibid., 43.

[5]    Evans, *Broad Band*, paras. 8.11–8.25.

[6]    Ibid., paras. 8.61–8.65.

[7]    Janet Abbate, *Recoding Gender: Women's Changing Participation in Computing* (Cambridge – London: The MIT Press, 2012), 37.

United States stemmed from the pressure that U.S. society placed on females to return to their roles as traditional housewives, that is, to procreate.

Admittedly, the obstacles faced by female programmers gradually decreased over time, and the demand for their profession increased. According to the U.S. Census Bureau statistics, in 1960, the number of employed programmers reached 13,000. In 1970, there were 163,000 employed programmers, including 39,000 females.[8] The parity of males and females was reached in American universities in 1980.[9]

Oddly enough, the liberation of female programmers had another course in Poland. Before 1989, females were not persecuted in the Polish IT sector. On the contrary, Karolina Wasielewska argues that the widespread presence of females in the IT industry resulted from the needs of the People's Republic of Poland's dynamically developing industry: "Women flocked to industry and 'tractors'… primarily to earn a living… In such conditions, one did not look at one's gender, which benefited Polish women programmers and computer designers."[10] As early as 1956, Jowita Koncewicz was admitted to the Group of Mathematical Machines, followed by Ewa Zaborowska and Zofia Zjawin-Winkowska. According to Jan Borowiec's memoirs, even half of the white-collar computer industry workers were females.[11] However, most of them did the tedious work: punching perforated cards into the computer and thus translating the code into a sequence of ones and zeros.[12]

However, the mid-1980s was a period of intensified disengagement for females in the IT industry in the United States and Western Europe. In her book *Brotopia*, Emily Chang argues that a study by psychologists William Cannon and Dallis Perry played a crucial role in this disengagement. Although the research sample containing psychological profiles of 1,378 programmers was flawed—with only 186 females included[13]—Cannon and Perry asserted that ideal programmers "dislike activities involving close personal interaction; they are generally more interested in things than in people."[14] Software corporations widely used Cannon and Perry's test, resulting in the male-centric stereotype of the withdrawn nerd becoming a reality.

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[8]  Ibid.
[9]  Emily Chang, *Brotopia: Breaking up the Boys' Club of Silicon Valley* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), para. 5.21.
[10]  Karolina Wasielewska, *Cyfrodziewczyny. Pionierki polskiej informatyki* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2020), 13.
[11]  Ibid., 41.
[12]  Ibid., 59.
[13]  Chang, *Brotopia*, para. 6.16.
[14]  Steve Cannon, "Godard, the Groupe Dziga Vertov and the Myth of 'Counter Cinema'," *Nottingham French Studies* 32, no. 1 (1993): 63, https://doi.org/10.3366/nfs.1993.008.

Guided by Cannon and Perry's research, corporations preferred to hire such a withdrawn nerd rather than an empathetic female in the interest of productivity.[15]

Chang writes that there has been an exodus of females from the United States software industry since 1984. As polytechnics blindly followed Cannon and Perry's ideal psychological profile while spurning talented female programming students, a paradoxical situation arose:

> The idea that computer science was competitive and unwelcoming became widespread and started to have an effect even at institutions without strict grade requirements. It was then that computer science became not only nerdy but also elitist, operating on an impossible catch-22: the only way to be a programmer was to already be a programmer. If you learned to program at a young age, that became indicative of a natural affinity with the field. Because more boys entering college had already spent years tinkering with computers and playing video games in their bedrooms, they had an edge that girls did not.[16]

Karolina Wasielewska adds that since the 1980s, a similar trend has been drawn for games: "computers and game consoles were sold in toy shops as merchandise for boys… At that time, they [girls] were made to understand that this was not entertainment for them."[17] Sexist advertising and columns in gaming magazines confirmed this stereotype[18]. It was also reproduced in the male-designed games themselves, where the stereotype of female characters as "damsels in distress,"[19] "rewards for victory,"[20] or sexualized objects of male desire persisted[21]. Since that decade, computers have become "attributes of masculinity" and, simultaneously, power

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[15]    Chang, *Brotopia*, paras. 6.19–6.35.

[16]    Ibid., paras. 6.40–6.41.

[17]    Wasielewska, *Cyfrodziewczyny*, 16.

[18]    Jesse Fox and Wai Yen Tang, "Sexism in Video Games and the Gaming Community," in *New Perspectives on the Social Aspects of Digital Gaming*, ed. Rachel Kowert and Thorsten Quandt (Routledge, 2017), 115–35, pp. 121-122. See also the fragment of Dominika Staszenko's Polish dissertation where the discrimination of women in Polish-language magazines is discussed: Dominika Staszenko-Chojnacka, "Narodziny Medium. Gry wideo w polskiej prasie hobbystycznej końca XX wieku" (PhD thesis, Uniwersytet Łódzki, 2020), http://dspace.uni.lodz.pl:8080/xmlui/handle/11089/32081, pp. 158-182.

[19]    Anita Saarkesian, "Damsel in Distress (Part 1) Tropes Vs. Women" (Feminist Frequency, 2013), https://feministfrequency.com/video/damsel-in-distress-part1/.

[20]    Jessica Conditt, "New Feminist Frequency Video Examines 'Women as Reward'" (Engadget, 2015), https://www.engadget.com/2015/08/31/feministfrequency-video-women-as-reward/.

[21]    Kim Tae, "Video Game Industry Struggles to Shake Sexist Attitudes," *Bloomberg Opinion*, December 27, 2021, https://archive.is/iVVK4.

characteristics.[22] Males symbolically dominated females—discouraged from participating in the industry—by wielding power over computers. Nevertheless, in the 1980s, females tried establishing themselves in the computer and entertainment industry, as I will prove in the next section.

## 2.2 Female Presence in the Digital Game Field

The first female developers who achieved modest success in digital games were Dona Bailey, Carol Shaw, and Roberta Williams in the United States.[23] However, at least Bailey and Shaw worked in unfriendly conditions. Bailey was hired by Atari in 1980, which held a monopoly on the international video game market, and males monopolized digital game programming within the company. Bailey was the only female programmer employed at Atari before the 1982 crash. She described her experience working with males: "It was my first exposure to this kind of situation when you're the only person of a certain kind; you kind of lose your identity."[24]

### 2.2.1 1980–2000: The Pioneering Decades

Such lost identity is evident in *Centipede*,[25] a result of Bailey's collaboration with prominent Atari programmer Ed Logg. Similar to Logg's earlier game, *Asteroids* (1979),[26] players in *Centipede* shoot objects that break into pieces. However, the key difference lies in the character substitution: asteroids are replaced by the eponymous creatures moving across the board, and spaceships from Asteroids are swapped for attacking spiders and mushrooms. This change significantly impacted girls' identification with digital games, making Bailey and Logg's creation one of the first titles to primarily appeal to female players.[27]

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[22] Clifford Nass, Youngme Moon, and Nancy Green, "Are Machines Gender Neutral? Gender-stereotypic Responses to Computers with Voices," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 27, no. 10 (1997): 864–76, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.1997.tb00275.x.

[23] Dovey and Kennedy, *Game Cultures*, 82.

[24] Cf. Leigh Alexander, "The Original Gaming Bug: Centipede Creator Dona Bailey" (Gamasutra, August 27, 2007), https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/130082/the_original_gaming_bug_centipede_.php.

[25] Dona Bailey and Ed Logg, *Centipede*, version Arcade (United States: Atari, 1980).

[26] Ed Logg, *Asteroids*, version Arcade (United States: Atari, 1979).

[27] A study conducted in 1986 (Craig A. Anderson and Catherine M. Ford, "Affect of the Game Player," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 12, no. 4 (1986): 390–402, https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167286124002) demonstrated that *Centipede* caused less anxiety and depression in female players than in male players, the opposite of a shooting game *Zaxxon* (ibid.).

The origins of commercially released female games targeting female audiences can be traced back to Shaw's unreleased polo-based sports game project in 1978. After developing adaptations of Tic-tac-toe and checkers, Shaw left Atari in 1980 and briefly worked at Tandem studio before joining Activision. In a later interview with *Vintage Computing and Gaming*, Shaw disclosed that her sole game for Activision, *River Raid*,[28] was actually a modified version of an unrealized space game project.[29]

Indeed, parallels can be drawn between Shaw's work and *Star Wars*,[30] comparing the jet fighter flight along a river canyon in *River Raid* to the cinematic Rebel attack on the Death Star (despite *River Raid* lacking a successful ending). Furthermore, *River Raid* was designed with a male audience in mind, as players control a jet fighter to destroy enemy helicopters, planes, tanks, and bridges. Thus, Shaw may have relied on the male decision-makers at Activision, a company entwined in the military-entertainment complex.

A temporary surge of female liberation in the digital games industry occurred around 1985, when numerous games featuring significant female characters were released. As Laine Nooney noted,[31] Roberta Williams was a pioneering game developer. She debuted alongside her husband Ken with *Mystery House*[32] but gained fame primarily for the groundbreaking graphic adventure game *King's Quest*,[33] and the first controllable female avatar in *King's Quest IV*.[34] In the latter game, protagonist Princess Rosella drives the story's drama with her desire to cure her father, Graham. The game's conflict centers on the clash between two powerful sorceresses, with Rosella playing a key role. The only notable male characters are Rosella's ailing father and an admirer whose proposal she rejects in the *King's Quest IV* finale.

During the 1980s, French-speaking female software specialists significantly contributed to the female presence in digital games, particularly as illustrators. Karine Le Pors was the first notable French creator to develop vector artwork and design for *Le Manoir du dr Genius*,[35] the debut game of her boyfriend, Laurent Benes. Companies such as Infogrames, Cobra Soft, and Coktel Vision also employed numerous female graphic designers, including Josiane Girard, who

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[28]   Carol Shaw, *River Raid*, version Atari 2600 (USA: Activision, 1982).

[29]   Benj Edwards, "VC&G Interview: Carol Shaw, Atari's First Female Video Game Developer" (Vintage Computing and Gaming, October 12, 2011), https://archive.is/a1bwr.

[30]   George Lucas, *Star Wars*, DVD (1977; repr., United States: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2015).

[31]   Nooney, "A Pedestal, A Table, A Love Letter".

[32]   Roberta Williams and Ken Williams, *Mystery House*, version Apple II (USA: On-Line Systems, 1980).

[33]   Sierra On-Line, *King's Quest*, version Apple II (USA: Sierra On-Line, 1984).

[34]   Sierra On-Line, *King's Quest IV*, version Apple II (USA: Sierra On-Line, 1988).

[35]   Karine Le Pors and Laurent Benes, *Le Manoir Du Dr Genius*, version Oric (France: Loriciels, 1983).

created the artwork for *La Geste d'Artillac*[36] and *La Quête de l'Oiseau du temps*;[37] Dominique Girou, who was responsible for the illustrations for the diptych *Les Passagers du vent*;[38] Catherine Oskian, wife of Coktel founder Roland Oskian; and architect Nathalie Delance, who crafted a detailed panorama of Venice for the game *Meurtres à Venise*.[39] Additionally, Béatrice Langlois developed a voice synthesizer for two Lankhor studio games—*Le Manoir de Mortevielle*[40] and *Maupiti Island*.[41]

Female designers were also active in the French game industry in France, incorporating life experiences into their games. Clotilde Marion created *Même les pommes de terre ont des yeux*[42] for experimental software house Froggy Software. The game's objective is to overthrow a South American dictator, with its setting alluding to Augusto Pinochet's rule in Chile.[43] Marion claimed in a *Tilt* magazine interview that the game idea came to her while peeling potatoes.[44] The game features hungry inhabitants of a fictional country oppressed by the junta, demanding sweet potatoes. Chine Lanzmann, niece of renowned documentary filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, designed *La Femme qui ne supportait pas les ordinateurs*.[45] This game summarizes Lanzmann's experiences moderating online discussion groups on the Calvados network. The protagonist must save herself from a computer named Ordine, who tries to seduce and frame her for murder, and from aggressive forum users. The game offers six endings, all unfavorable for the avatar. Furthermore, *La Femme* conveys that females might struggle in networks dominated by aggressive men, warning that female users could quickly lose agency in new media. Notably, neither Marion nor Lanzmann participated in creating subsequent Froggy games. Lanzmann, in particular, was discouraged by an extremely aggressive review in *Tilt* magazine.[46] Talented designer Marianne Barbançon (Marianne Rougeulle), successfully adapted Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* for Coktel Vision[47] but did not continue

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[36]  Infogrames, *La Geste d'Artillac*, version Amstrad CPC (France: Infogrames, 1985).
[37]  Infogrames, *La Quête de l'Oiseau Du Temps*, version Amiga (France: Infogrames, 1989).
[38]  Infogrames, *Les Passagers Du Vent*, version Atari ST (France: Infogrames, 1986).
[39]  Cobra Soft, *Meurtres à Venise*, version Amiga (France: Infogrames, 1988).
[40]  Lankhor, *Le Manoir de Mortevielle*, version Amiga (France: Lankhor, 1987).
[41]  Lankhor, *Maupiti Island*, version Amiga (France: Lankhor, 1990).
[42]  Ibid.
[43]  Alexis Blanchet and Guillaume Montagnon, *Une histoire du jeu vidéo en France: 1960–1991: des labos aux chambres d'ados* (Houdan: Éditions Pix'n Love, 2020), 343.
[44]  Clotilde Marion, "Le créateur du mois : Clotilde Marion," *Tilt*, no. 28 (1986): 8.
[45]  Froggy Software, *La femme qui ne supportait pas les ordinateurs*.
[46]  Patrice Desmedt, "La Femme qui ne supportait pas les ordinateurs," *Tilt*, no. 31 (1986): 128–29.
[47]  Coktel Vision, *20 000 Lieues Sous Les Mers*, version Amiga (Coktel Vision, 1989).

her career. Another Coktel Vision designer, Muriel Tramis, achieved greater fame, with her work discussed in a separate chapter.

However, male hegemony in the industry was prevalent, and few female designers could incorporate feminist or intersectional themes into their games to thrive in the digital game field. Angela R. Cox notes that even Lori Cole's pioneering *Quest for Glory I*[48] perpetuated patriarchal hegemony. While the game subverted typical fantasy tropes with Elsa, the princess in distress, revealed as the brigand band leader and more competent than her brother Bernard, the plot resolution restores the patriarchal order. The band is defeated, and Elsa returns to her domineering father, a local baron, maintaining simplified gender roles.[49]

Cox asserts that Jane Jensen's popular game *Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers*[50] faces similar issues. The protagonist, Gabriel, uncovers a German sect led by Malia, a woman possessed by a male demon. In the canonical ending, Gabriel saves himself and his female assistant Grace, who considers the male demon's domination over generations of females a "real tragedy." However, the game primarily focuses on male interactions, and the final playable stage reinforces the "damsel in distress" trope. Consequently, Cox argues, "*Gabriel Knight* is a prime example of a case in which game design attempts to be feminist in its writing and imagery, but fails at the crucial level of gameplay and procedural rhetoric."[51]

*Phantasmagoria*,[52] directed by Roberta Williams, most powerfully addressed female oppression. Produced using full-motion video technology and featuring amateur actors, the game was a significant endeavor for its time. The protagonist, Adrienne, moves with her husband, Don, into a haunted house where a demon disrupts their idyllic lives. The demon possesses Don, forcing him to rape Adrienne. Traumatized, the heroine experiences numerous disturbing visions and can only escape her fate by killing Don. Cox offered the following analysis of *Phantasmagoria*:

> *Phantasmagoria* functions as a fantastical representation of the female experience
> of mundane misogyny and domestic abuse, in which the demon that possesses
> the key men in the game (Don in the present, Carno in the past) is a supernatural,

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[48]   Sierra On-Line, *Quest for Glory*, version Apple II (USA: Sierra On-Line, 1989).
[49]   Angela R. Cox, "Women by Women: A Gender Analysis of Sierra Titles by Women Designers," in *Feminism in Play*, ed. Kishonna L. Gray, Gerald Voorhees, and Emma Vossen (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 25–26, http://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-3-319-90539-6_2.
[50]   Sierra On-Line, *Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers*, version DOS (USA: Sierra On-Line, 1993).
[51]   Cox, "Women by Women," 24.
[52]   Sierra On-Line, *Phantasmagoria*, version DOS (USA: Sierra On-Line, 1995).

literal manifestation of misogyny, causing men to become controlling and to react violently to any perceived threat to their authority over the women in their lives.[53]

Consequently, *Phantasmagoria* received mixed reviews. Williams addressed the controversy by noting that her game appealed more to casual players interested in "exploring an interesting story" than to digital game veterans and arcade enthusiasts.[54] might have paved the way for a shift towards casual games accessible to inexperienced audiences. Coincidentally, the game aligned with academic discussions about the potential inclusion of females in gaming culture.[55]

However, these discussions (stimulated by female scholars and designers) were suppressed in the 2000s.

### 2.2.2  2000–2010: The Regression

In 2001, the newly founded journal *Game Studies* saw its editor-in-chief, Espen Aarseth, sharply accuse film and literary scholars (mainly Janet Murray) of "colonizing attempts" directed against emerging game studies.[56] Amanda Phillips suggests that the narratology versus ludology debate was gendered, impacting the representation of female game scholars:

> [Murray's] insistence on the importance of narrative and representation (both associated with culture and the feminine) to the study of video games was intolerable… The ludologists promoted a formalist perspective (associated with masculine rationality) from within what they described as a vulnerable position within the academy… They were also the men who planted a flag on 2001 as the year game studies began, minimizing the importance of the work that came before, and who eventually rose to prominence as its founding fathers.[57]

Reviewing the issues of *Game Studies* published between 2001 and 2005 (the peak of the ludology vs narratology debate), it is difficult to agree with Phillips. Females, including those writing feminist critiques, were able to publish their articles in *Game Studies* from

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53    Cox, "Women by Women," 32.

54    Andy Bellatti, "Roberta Williams" (Adventure Classic Gaming, October 25, 1999), http://archive.is/DZM1.

55    Cassell and Jenkins, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*.

56    Espen Aarseth, "Computer Game Studies, Year One," *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html; Markku Eskelinen, "The Gaming Situation," *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/.

57    Amanda Denise Phillips, *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 51–52.

the early beginning, as demonstrated by Torill Elvira Mortensen and Helen W. Kennedy.[58] However, Aarseth's declaration: "the dimensions of Lara Croft's body, already analyzed to death by film theorists, are irrelevant to me as a player… When I play, I don't even see her body, but see through it and past it,"[59] did not help shape the inclusive image of the journal. Diplomatically responding to Aarseth's statement, Jon Dovey and Helen W. Kennedy argue that avatar representation remains important, especially since Lara Croft in the early *Tomb Raider* games was considered a sex symbol. Therefore, ludology "leaves unchallenged the political dimension of these representations."[60]

In the 2000s, female designers were particularly discouraged in their work. At least in the first half of the decade, the entry threshold increased, with inexperienced individuals only able to join development studios as junior testers. As Tracy Fullerton et al. explained in 2008, game testers are required to be "hard-core gamers," a role that generally excludes females.[61] Those females who managed to enter game companies from other industries faced challenging work conditions, as described in Mia Consalvo's 2008 research.

> As part of a minority group in most development studios, they [women] often express frustration at having to "fit in" to a masculine culture, or worse, feel that they are being "treated differently" simply because they are women. Adding those concerns to the already difficult work hours and never-ending demand for passion in their approach can leave some feeling burned out and ready to move on to other fields.[62]

Directing a game, not juest participating in its development, took much more effort for females than for males, and females were much easier to criticize when they entered the direction field. Consider *XIII*,[63] a shooting game directed by French female creator Elisabeth

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58  Torill Elvira Mortensen, "Playing With Players," *Game Studies* 2, no. 1 (2001), http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/mortensen/; Helen W. Kennedy, "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis," *Game Studies* 2, no. 2 (2002), http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy/.

59  Espen Aarseth, "Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation," in *First Person: New Media As Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 48.

60  Dovey and Kennedy, *Game Cultures*, 92–93.

61  Tracy Fullerton et al., "Getting Girls into the Game: Toward a 'Virtuous Circle'," in *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*, ed. Yasmin B. Kafai et al. (2008; repr., Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), 169.

62  Mia Consalvo, "Crunched by Passion: Women Game Developers and Workplace Challenges," in *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*, ed. Yasmin B. Kafai et al. (2008; repr., Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), 188.

63  Ubisoft, *XIII*, version Windows (France: Ubisoft, 2003).

Pellen. *XIII* is an adaptation of a graphic novel series by Jean Van Hamme and William Vance. Its protagonist, an amnesiac trying to recall his past, is initially believed to be assassin Steve Rowland, hired to kill the American president. However, XIII is not Rowland, but an innocent man forced to undergo plastic surgery and impersonate the actual murderer, who was killed shortly after the assassination. Pellen followed the graphic novels' plot ande mphasized their cartoon convention with cel-shading graphics. Pellen explained her role behind *XIII* in one interview:

> I was a scriptwriter but I also modeled game levels and made a lot of non-blocking scripted sequences. I was already waging war on cinematics. And I didn't expect to lead this fight because I had abandoned cinema for a more interactive medium and I didn't understand the desire to interrupt the game with filmed sequences. What interested me was to create narrative tools specific to video games and not to copy cinema.[64]

What might be suspicious for ludologists? Of course, "narrative." In 2009, ludologist Miguel Sicart accused *XIII* of having an "unethical design," which he defines as "not allowing [the players] to bring their own values and practices into the game, dismissing or disempowering them."[65] In contrast, ethical games allow the player to "reflect on the meaning of her actions and their consequences,"[66] and according to Sicart, *XIII* lacked ethics:

> When players reach the bank, they are commanded not to shoot the police. In fact, if they do so, the game will stop and force them to replay. Of course, this is a contradiction with the narrative of the game: if we are amnesic assassins, why is it that we cannot shoot the police? Why does that (unethical) action interrupt our gameplay?[67]

Never mind that Sicart, who criticizes *XIII* more than a dozen times in one book, ignores the context of the *XIII* graphic novels. If the titular character could shoot anyone when confronted by police officers, his efforts to protect his good name would be pointless. The critical failure of the hyperviolent French crime game *Hopkins FBI*,[68] in which a playable FBI agent could

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[64]  Elisabeth Pellen, "La diversité tire la qualité des productions vers le haut" (Loisirs Numériques, March 24, 2019), https://bit.ly/3pJvDAG.

[65]  Miguel Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 139.

[66]  Ibid., 154.

[67]  Ibid., 21.

[68]  MP Entertainment, *Hopkins FBI*, version Windows (France: Cryo Interactive, 1998).

kill anyone during his investigation, serves as a valuable lesson. Surprisingly, Sicart considers the highly controversial *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*[69] a more ethical game,[70] despite its hypocritical racial politics and cynical portrayal of U.S. reality.[71] Sicart was not the first to treat *XIII* harshly. For example, Robert Coffey's scathing review states, "*XIII*'s protagonist has amnesia—apparently, the game's developers do as well."[72] In reality, it is Coffey who seems to forget that female developers also make games. Notably, *XIII* was Ubisoft's first and last game where Pellen—and females in general—had a certain degree of creative freedom.[73]

Pellen's illustrates that female game designers faced tremendous pressure in the 2000s compared to the previous decade. Nina B. Huntemann cites a 2005 International Game Developers Association survey, which found that males held "95 percent of program, 90 percent of design and 89 percent of art jobs—the key creative positions in game development."[74] During the 2000s, some female designers conformed to the dominant discourse around games to survive in the male-dominated industry. For instance, American game writer Marianne Krawczyk contributed to the *God of War* gaming franchise,[75] known for its toxic hypermasculine tropes until

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[69]  Rockstar North, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, version Windows (United Kingdom: Take-Two Interactive, 2005).

[70]  Sicart defends *San Andreas* by saying: "the player can only totally complete the game by performing vehicle stunts that are rewarded with points and completion percentages, among other harmless collection activities" (Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games*, 49). However, it would be naive to say that gamers bought *San Andreas* just for the stunts or to work as cab drivers. On the contrary, the main storyline, without which the game cannot be fully completed, is based on robberies and shootouts. Moreover, players frequently bought *San Andreas* in order to unlock the infamous "Hot Coffee" option (allowing simulated sex with females), which was programmed into the original game's code (Cf. Ben DeVane and Kurt D. Squire, "The Meaning of Race and Violence in Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas," *Games and Culture* 3, no. 3-4 (2008): 264, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412008317308).

[71]  Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 165–70.

[72]  Robert Coffey, "Review: XIII," *Computer Gaming World*, no. 235 (February 2004): 83.

[73]  Strangely, *XIII* became attacked from another perspective. Derek A. Burrill uses *XIII* as a typical amalgamate of "masculine fantasy signifiers (the lifeguard, the narrow escape, the preprogrammed 'skills' of combat) and videogame conventions" (Derek A. Burrill, *Die Tryin': Videogames, Masculinity, Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 1). Unfortunately, for Burrill, *XIII* is only a pretext (to whom he never returns) to ponder how digital games embody the masculine tropes from the early beginnings. Still, he relies on a poor methodological framework. Comprehensive studies on Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois and several mind-game films overwhelm here the actual analyses of games. Moreover, Burrill concludes that digital games are linked to eternal 'boyhood.' But obviously, he does not dare to discover who was *XIII*'s director. Nor does he answer whether female game designers can undermine hyper-masculine tropes in digital games.

[74]  Nina B. Huntemann, "Women in Video Games: The Case of Hardware Production and Promotion," in *Gaming Globally*, ed. Nina B. Huntemann and Ben Aslinger (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013), 48, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137006332_3.

[75]  Santa Monica Studio, *God of War*, version PlayStation 2 (USA: Sony Computer Entertainment, 2005); Santa Monica Studio, *God of War II*, version PlayStation 3 (USA: Sony Computer Entertainment, 2009); Santa Monica Studio, *God of War III*, version PlayStation 3 (USA: Sony Computer Entertainment, 2009).

the 2018 reboot.[76] Steven Conway notes, "the game's logic of violent control and domination is not only emphasized through the series' play, it is further garnished by the constant, graphic humiliation of the opponent."[77] American creative director Amy Hennig, who directed the development of three *Uncharted* digital games Naughty Dog[78], based their adventurous main character Nathan Drake on the cinematic archaeologist Indiana Jones. According to Megan Crouse, although Drake has a significantly empowered female friend and assistant, Elena Fisher, her role relies on being a sidekick and eventual love interest. Nor "damsel in distress" nor "a piece of eye candy," Fisher nonetheless still "plays a more lasting Marion Ravenwood to Drake's Indiana Jones."[79]

However, there are also examples of female-contributed games that carried more positive messages. For instance, one can cite *Portal*,[80] whose lead designer was Kimberly Swift. *Portal* was praised for challenging the objectifying male gaze. The player sees the world from the perspective of Chell, the game's leading female character, locked in a giant building by the feminine computer GLaDOS. Moreover, the ambiguous maternal personality of GLaDOS herself received positive appraisal.[81] Bonnie Ruberg's "too-close" analysis of *Portal* even states that one can attribute *Portal*'s success to hidden homoerotic tones: "the game operates from the perspective of women, and specifically the perspective of queer women."[82]

*Mirror's Edge*,[83] directed by Swedish developer Senta Jakobsen and written by Rhianna Pratchett, stands out in this context as rooted in intersectional feminism. The story of underground parkour courier Faith Connors, who conducts urban guerrilla struggle against the oppressive government, is notable for several reasons. Firstly, Faith is East Asian, which enhances the positive representation of non-white characters. Secondly, *Mirror's Edge*'s criticism of totalitarian patriarchy becomes nuanced as Faith's twin sister works for state authority. David Ciccoricco acknowledges this nuance, stating that *Mirror's Edge* "should not be regarded as

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76    Santa Monica Studio, *God of War*, version PlayStation 4 (USA: Sony Computer Entertainment, 2018).

77    Steven Conway, "Poisonous Pantheons: God of War and Toxic Masculinity," *Games and Culture* 15, no. 8 (December 2020): 950, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019858898.

78    *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception*, version PlayStation 3 (United States: Sony Computer Entertainment, 2011).

79    Megan Crouse, "Star Wars: Amy Hennig and Feminism in Gaming" (Den of Geek, April 7, 2014), https://www.denofgeek.com/games/star-wars-amy-hennig-and-feminism-in-gaming/.

80    Valve Software, *Portal*, version Windows (USA: Valve Software, 2007).

81    Stephanie Harkin, "'The Only Thing You've Managed to Break So Far Is My Heart': An Analysis of Portal's Monstrous Mother GLaDOS," *Games and Culture* 15, no. 5 (2020): 539, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412018819663.

82    Bonnie Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 81.

83    DICE, *Mirror's Edge*, version Windows (Sweden and USA: Electronic Arts, 2008).

feminist in any reductive or essentialist way."[84] Instead, Jakobsen and Pratchett's game is a progressive experience regardless of the player's gender.

Notwithstanding, Polish artist Ewa Szczyrek made the boldest attempt to create an intersectional game. *The Antykoncepcja Game*,[85] initially published in 2003 as a simple arcade game, transformed in 2005 into a social networking site whose release on Women's Day sparked protests from national Catholic circles. Since Szczyrek's game is unfortunately no longer moderated or updated, I will quote a fragment of an article published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*:

> In *Antykoncepcja*, the chosen female fighter… must overcome five levels of sperms' attack. She has several firearms at her disposal, such as machine guns, a pistol, a grenade, or a cannon. On each level, the sperms are faster and more cunning. The player ranks in two rankings as you progress through the levels: Sperm Slayer and Biggest Victim. If you become the contraception master, the best sperm tamer, you will be rewarded with a package of actual contraceptives. However, that is the game over for you. To move on to the next stage, you have to lose the first stage, the war against sperm.
>
> The second stage is pregnancy. Your cyber baby develops online. You watch it grow. Now you have to become a responsible parent—go to a virtual gynecologist, pay maintenance… You have to be careful because the child plays pranks, for example, impersonates you and tries to hack into the network. This stage culminates in a solution—a celebrated birth.
>
> After the baby is born, you have to register it… and give it a name. You start to bring it up. You have to talk to it, teach it, take it to the nursery, kindergarten, feed it, take it for walks in the park. If you send your picture to the base, it is highly likely to become increasingly like you. And if you cannot cope with your duties as a parent, you can place your cyber child in a 24-hour nursery or a network orphanage.[86]

After abortion was made illegal in Poland in 1993, creating such a game—moderated by the Grzenda.pl collective, consisting of Szczyrek, Małgorzata Markiewicz, Monika Wysokrocka,

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[84] David Ciccoricco, "Narrative, Cognition, and the Flow of *Mirror's Edge*," *Games and Culture* 7, no. 4 (July 2012): 275, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412012454223.

[85] Grzenda.pl, *Antykoncepcja*, version Web (Grzenda.pl, April 4, 2005), https://web.archive.org/web/20050404043928/http://grzenda.art.pl/antykoncepcja/.

[86] Katarzyna Bik, "The Antykoncepcja Game," *Gazeta Wyborcza Kraków*, March 6, 2005, https://krakow.wyborcza.pl/krakow/1,35796,2587066.html.

Marta Firlet, and Katarzyna Ignatiuk—stirred up controversy. The game sparked a lively discussion in the mainstream media. About two million people engaged with the world of *The Antykoncepcja Game*, including females and males experimenting with virtual gender identity.[87] Furthermore, Anna Nacher argues that *Antykoncepcja* was ahead of its time and foreshadowed females' fight against the GamerGate online harassment campaign.[88]

### 2.2.3 Since 2010: Females Reclaiming the Digital Game Field

The second decade of the 21st century accelerated the female presence within the digital game field. In her highly influential end-of-decade book *Play Like a Feminist* written in 2020, Shira Chess provided statistics claiming that the percentage of females in the digital game industry rose from 11 per cent in 2009 to 22 per cent in 2014.[89] Chess also emphasized the aim for females within the digital game field: to disrupt the digital game industry and establish more equal means to produce and enjoy play:

> I want to annihilate the toxic cultures, mediocre products, and public reputation
> of this industry… I want to see a mass scale of games that captivate, enrapture,
> and educate. I want to destroy the industry, disrupt the playground, and find ways
> to make games better. To do this, we need more feminists playing games, on the
> front lines of gaming culture, and making games.[90]

The need to disrupt the industry and reinstate independent gaming, which became part of Chess's manifesto, was partly motivated by reactionary movements within game cultures, including GamerGate and the alt-right (which I will discuss below). On the other hand, it can be said that the presence of females in digital games has increased in both quantity and quality.

Above all, females' work on symptoms of depression has gained importance. Zoë Quinn, in her *Depression Quest*,[91] proved how complicated and arduous the process of healing from depression is. *Depression Quest* is an interactive fiction where the illness partly limits the main character's potential choices during play. The decision to undertake psychiatric treatment,

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[87]    Anna Nacher, "Gry wideo wchodzą w dorosłość: w stronę lokalnej genealogii dyskusji wokół gier artystycznych," *Kultura Współczesna*, no. 2 (2016): 54.

[88]    Ibid., 53.

[89]    Chess, *Play Like a Feminist*, 11.

[90]    Ibid., 86.

[91]    The Quinnspiracy, *Depression Quest*, version Web (USA: The Quinnspiracy, 2013), http://www.depression quest.com/.

take antidepressants, and be honest about the protagonist's condition is crucial to her slow change. Brazilian designer Thais Weiller's *Rainy Day*[92] emphasizes the same theme but is more pessimistic. The main character finds it difficult even to leave her house, let alone work and contact friends. Meanwhile, *The Average Everyday Adventures of Samantha Brown*[93] deals with social phobia; the titular character, living in a dormitory, takes on the heroic challenge of leaving her room and preparing a meal for herself in a shared kitchen.

Some females in the digital games field have also tackled nonbinary sexuality. For example, on Flash, German designer Lea Schönfelder created the provocative game *Ute*.[94] The grandmother of the titular main character orders her to find a husband. However, the girl must first have intercourse with as many males as possible, avoiding the situation in which one witnesses sex with another. The ending is always similar: Ute marries the last male non-player character who did not witness the sexual encounter. However, reading Schönfelder's game as an apotheosis of the patriarchal order is risky. Instead, as Cara Ellison explains, the in-game "men have no sexual agency. They are collectibles. Ute uses what seems like their inability to say no… for her own gratification, even though she too is eventually being punished for it."[95] In one of her most recent productions, co-created by Peter Lu, *Perfect Woman*[96] for Xbox One, Schönfelder portrayed the diverse experiences of females worldwide who must fulfill the role of "perfect woman" imposed upon them by men. Ironically, *Perfect Woman*'s difficulty level increases dramatically as the viewer takes on females aspiring to higher social roles (college graduates, lawyers, professors).

Spanish scholar Eurídice Cabañes coordinated the work on *Homozapping*,[97] a game about defining a sexual identity. *Homozapping* confronts the player with sexually explicit and disturbing videos (e.g., animal copulation, human sex visible through x-rays) and mini-games. The latter ones test, for example, the player's knowledge of male/female genitals and their ability to indicate "queers" among diverse characters moving through the screen. Nevertheless, these videos and mini-games can be quickly zapped; at the end of the game, the player receives statistics that show the sexual preferences of all players taking part in *Homozapping*.

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[92]  Thais Weiller, *Rainy Day*, version Web (Brazil: itch.io, 2016), https://thaisa.itch.io/rainy-day.

[93]  Lemonsucker Games, *The Average Everyday Adventures of Samantha Brown*, version Windows (USA: Lemonsucker Games, 2016).

[94]  Lea Schönfelder, *Ute*, version Flash (Germany: Kunsthochschule Kassel, 2010).

[95]  Cara Ellison, "S.EXE: Ute by Lea Schönfelder (NSFW)" (Rock, Paper, Shotgun, January 17, 2014), https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2014/01/17/s-exe-ute-by-lea-schonfelder-nsfw/.

[96]  Peter Lu and Lea Schönfelder, *A Perfect Woman*, version Xbox One, 2017.

[97]  PlayLab, *Homozapping*, version Web (Spain and Mexico: ArsGames, 2016), https://arsgames.net/recursos/videojuegos-radicales/homozapping/.

In her oft-reported work *Dys4ia*,[98] transwoman Anna Anthropy described her experiences of taking female hormones and gender correction. *Dys4ia* narrates these experiences in an accessible form to the user, typical of arcade games from the 1980s. However, the novelty of this game, as Andrzej Strużyna argues, lies in "internalizing the perspective of the artist, that is, feeling the emotions and experiences appearing during the narrative together with the protagonist."[99] Other interesting experiments by Anthropy include the game *Queers in the End of the World*,[100] programmed in Twine. Here, with 10 seconds left until the end of the world, the player can confess her love to the same-sex partner in different ways.

Similar transgender tropes appeared in *Celeste*,[101] a challenging platform game by Maddy Thorson and Noel Berry. Thorson, a transgender person, merged pixel art aesthetics with Mario-like mechanics while also embedded a story about the transgender character Madelin who struggles with anxiety and depression. *Celeste*'s importance stems from the fact that the game became the focus of the queer players' community.[102]

Japanese creator npckc gained recognition for *A Year of Springs*,[103] a visual novel trilogy similar to *Perfect Woman* in its intersectional approach. The trilogy allows the player to impersonate three young persons: transsexual Haru, bisexual Erika, and asexual Manami. These characters struggle with their sexual orientation, and the game highlights the conservatism of living in Japan. For example, Haru, a 19-years old male invited to the public bath, realizes that there are no baths for transgender individuals. Haru then faces the dilemma: coming out to the receptionists and friends, concealing their orientation, or fleeing? However, npckc demonstrates paradoxically, only the first option (coming out) allows the game's characters to function within the repressive society. Npckc was inspired by press coverage of transgender person arrested at a public bath for entering the wrong facilities. As the developer said in one interview, "I wanted to create something that would happen if things were just a little bit kinder."[104] The procedural rhetoric, indicated by heart points, rewards the player for sincerity toward others and punishes them for withdrawing into themselves. Among female creators tackling LGBT

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[98]    Anna Anthropy, *Dys4ia*, version Flash (USA: Newgrounds, 2012).

[99]    Andrzej Strużyna, "Artystyczne gry Anny Anthropy," *Homo Ludens* 6, no. 1 (2014): 191.

[100]   Anna Anthropy, *Queers in the End of the World*, version Twine (USA: itch.io, 2013).

[101]   Matt Makes Games, *Celeste*, version Windows (Canada: Matt Makes Games, 2018).

[102]   Jeremy Signor, "How the Celeste Speedrunning Community Became Queer as Hell," November 30, 2021, https://kotaku.com/how-the-celeste-speedrunning-community-became-queer-as-1848120383.

[103]   Npckc, *A Year of Springs*, version Windows (Japan: npckc, 2021).

[104]   Cf. Alicia Haddick, "A Year of Springs Dev Npckc "Never Planned" on Making Games, but Wanted to Tell Kinder LGBTQ+ Stories" (Rock Paper Shotgun, August 23, 2022), https://archive.is/rbUEH.

and postcolonial themes, one can also mention Christine Love and Elizabeth LaPensée, whose work will be the topic of separate analyses.

New Zealand studio Metia Interactive, led by Maru Nihoniho, has been following the path of cultural diversity. For example, Nihoniho produced *Maori Pā Wars*,[105] a tower defense game deeply rooted in Maori imagery. The player may stem the tide of enemy attacks by calling Maori warriors (also female ones), gods, and animals into battle. Other programs produced by Nihoniho, paying tribute to Maori culture, include interactive fiction *Guardian Maia*[106] and platform game *E Oho – The Awakening*.[107]

## 2.2.4  The Emancipation Context

The increased female presence in the digital game field can be attributed to various factors. Firstly, new software platforms, including the highly influential Twine, were designed to create simple digital games and interactive fiction. Although Twine is insufficient for creating complex games, it has been a common framework used in schools and universities to develop small projects.[108] Secondly, new distribution platforms, such as itch.io (founded in 2013), make it easier for females to distribute their works royalty-free. Furthermore, Martyna Bakun emphasizes that itch.io allowed females to publish nonprofessional, sometimes autobiographical works.[109] Anna Anthropy also claimed that "digital distribution potentially means the most to the creators of free games—hobbyist game creators."[110]

However, the increased female presence in the digital game field was mainly due to the GamerGate controversy. GamerGate was a hashtag created by far-right gamers fearing so-called Cultural Marxism. Their initial targets were Zoë Quinn (blackmailed by her former partner) and Anita Sarkeesian (who led the feminist channel *Tropes vs. Women*). However, the GamerGate followers' internet hate quickly became directed at other females linked to

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[105]   Adrenalin Games, *Maori Pā Wars*, version Android (New Zealand: Metia Interactive, 2017).

[106]   Metia Interactive, *Guardian Maia*, version Android (New Zealand: Metia Interactive, 2019).

[107]   Tupuora, *E Oho – The Awakening*, version Android (New Zealand: Metia Interactive, 2020).

[108]   Stephanie Orme, "The Post-Feminist Politics of the "Everyone Can Make Games Movement"," in *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Justice*, ed. Kishonna L. Gray and David J. Leonard (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 65–81.

[109]   Martyna Bakun, "Algorytmy osobiste. Analiza zagadnienia amatorskich gier autobiograficznych udostępnionych na platformie itch.io," *Zeszyty Naukowe Towarzystwa Doktorantów Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Nauki Humanistyczne* 24, no. 1 (2019): 15, https://doi.org/10.26361/ZNTDH.10.2019.24.01.

[110]   Anna Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Dropouts, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012), 40.

the digital game industry or even game studies.[111]  Still, GamerGate followers do not realize that their harassment campaign inadvertently benefited intersectional feminists. Torill Elvira Mortensen notes that far-right males paradoxically popularized feminist views on digital games and fueled progressive scholarly criticism.[112]

Furthermore, GamerGate followers contributed to the situation they had feared—the re-working of traditionally masculinist or sexist franchises such as *Battlefield* and *God of War*. *Battlefield V*,[113] a World War II shooter featuring female soldiers, is a notable example.[114] It demonstrates how big-budget companies tried to keep up with changing trends in gaming gender inclusion, ultimately fueling gamers' intensified fury.[115]  The 2018 *God of War* reboot showcases the industry's evolution. While the preceding first trilogy deserved a reputation of being "ultra-violent, inescapably sexist, …a few camera frames away from x-rated,"[116] the reboot at least questioned the toxic masculinity that the franchise's main character, Kratos, had previously glorified.[117]

The GamerGate controversy paradoxically led to more prevalent female characters in games, even when the creators were male. *Life is Strange*,[118] directed by male developers Raoul Barbet and Michel Koch, serves as an intriguing example. *Life is Strange* introduced a positive LGBT relationship between two impoverished female teenagers to an already familiar time travel trope, despite the game's creators receiving criticism for dismantling its subversive potential in the last two episodes.[119]  Other critically acclaimed male-developed games with female or non-binary characters include Ken Wong's *Florence*,[120] a subtle and bittersweet story of

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[111]   See Torill Elvira Mortensen, "Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate," *Games and Culture* 13, no. 8 (December 13, 2018): 787–90, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016640408.

[112]   See ibid., 798.

[113]   EA DICE, *Battlefield V*, version Windows (Sweden and USA: Electronic Arts, 2018).

[114]   Even before *Battlefield V*, another World War II military shooter *Call of Duty 2* in the Soviet campaign's second mission featured a female soldier as a member of the player's team: Infinity Ward, *Call of Duty 2*, version Windows (USA: Activision, 2005).

[115]   See a master's thesis depicting the far-right gamers' response to *Battlefield V*'s gender-inclusive mechanics (Loraine Gauteul, "The Digital Myth of Women on The Battlefield: A Reception Analysis of Female Soldiers in the Online Discourse of Battlefield V" (Master's thesis, Jönköping University, 2019), 25–32, http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:hj:diva-44575).

[116]   David Ciccoricco, "Games of Interpretation and a Graphophiliac God of War," in *Intermediality and Storytelling*, ed. Marina Grishakova and Marie-Laure Ryan (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 232.

[117]   Conway, "Poisonous Pantheons," 944.

[118]   Dontnod Entertainment, *Life Is Strange*, version Windows (France: Focus Home Interactive, 2014).

[119]   Agata Waszkiewicz and Holger Pötzsch, "Life Is Bleak (in Particular for Women Who Exert Power and Try to Change the World): The Poetics and Politics of Life Is Strange," *Game Studies* 19, no. 3 (December 2019), http://gamestudies.org/1903/articles/waszkiewiczpotzsch.

[120]   Mountains, *Florence*, version Windows (2018; repr., United States: Annapurna Interactive, 2020).

heterosexual relationship; David Dedeine and Kevin Choteau's *A Plague Tale: Innocence*,[121] a violent parable of the Hundred Years War, playable from the perspectives of a French girl and her younger brother; and Toby Fox's *Undertale*,[122] whose protagonist is a child of ambiguous gender.

However, the increased symbolic female presence cannot hide the structural problem with the digital game field—the lack of females and people of color in critical roles such as game design.  Stephanie Orme stresses that "today's typical industry employee is a 32-year-old college-educated white male living in North America."[123]  This digital game field leaves little room for non-white, non-male, and non-cisgender designers.  As Kishonna Gray cautions, excluding oppressed groups in the game industry creates an ostracizing atmosphere unfriendly for female players and people of color.[124]  Symptoms of such discrimination can be found in high-budget games like the *Grand Theft Auto* series, which reinforces stereotypes of racial and sexual minorities, thus strengthening the dominant ideology.[125]  However, independent development studios also face issues with abusing females, as the recent example of Ken Wong demonstrates.[126]

Of course, females are not the only underprivileged group involved in making games and appearing in them. For example, African-American male blogger Evan Narcisse has explained the substantial issues with casting Black people as main characters in digital games:

> If we were really post-racial, then putting a black lead character in a game wouldn't matter, right?  Nary a second thought would be given.  But every time the issue comes up, it meets an ugly response… still, the huge untapped black audience ready to see and create themselves in today's games remain an invisible elephant in corporate boardrooms.[127]

Narcisse does not necessarily refer to Black avant-garde designers who find their haven at platforms like itch.io.  The misrepresentation of Black people mainly affects high-budget

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[121]  Asobo Studio, *A Plague Tale: Innocence*, version Windows (France: Focus Home Interactive, 2019).

[122]  Toby Fox, *Undertale*, version Windows (USA, 2015).

[123]  Orme, "The Post-Feminist Politics of the "Everyone Can Make Games Movement"," 72.

[124]  Kishonna Gray, *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live: Theoretical Perspectives from the Virtual Margins* (Waltham: Anderson Publishing, 2014), xxiii.

[125]  Ibid., 1–16.

[126]  James Batchelor, "Ken Wong Apologises Following Accounts of Abuse from Former Employee" (GamesIndustry.biz, August 29, 2019), https://bit.ly/3CiQbVH.

[127]  Evan Narcisse, "The Natural: The Parametres of Afro," in *The State of Play: Creators and Critics on Video Game Culture*, ed. Daniel Goldberg and Linus Larsson (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2015), 72–73.

commercial games targeted primarily at white audiences. Even rare cases like *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*,[128] where players can control a Black assassin fighting slavery in the West Indies, have faced criticism. For instance, Narcisse argues that the game's problematic mechanics "turned the same slaves you fought to free into currency to get more deadly weapons… Wait, isn't that the same commodification that I just worked to end inside the game's narrative?"[129] What can be said about *GTA: San Andreas*, where the 1992 Los Angeles riots are portrayed as an internal battle between a playable Black gangster (CJ) and a Black policeman (Tenpenny), rather than as a display of renewed white violence?[130]

In terms of intersectionality, contemporary game developers also attempt to make games more accessible to people with disabilities. Discussion on disability representation in digital games is still developing,[131] focusing mainly on facilitating the gameplay experience itself[132] or simulating the game avatars' temporary living with disability.[133] Examples of games addressing the physical restrictions of living with a disability are rare. Among AAA games, Damian Gałuszka and Dorota Żuchowska-Skiba highlight *Wolfenstein 2: The New Colossus*,[134] whose central hero, B.J. Blazkowicz, transitions from a fully-capable super-soldier known from previous *Wolfenstein* installments to a mocked-up "cripple," which also affects the avatar's limited control mechanics.[135] Meanwhile, independent games *Beyond Eyes* and *Perception*[136] simulate the experiences of blind individuals, with mechanics based on using other senses to

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[128]  Ubisoft Quebec, *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*, version Windows (Canada; France: Ubisoft, 2013).

[129]  Narcisse, "The Natural," 67.

[130]  Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter note that the actual riots of 1992 were prepared by "the loss of Californian centers of working-class employment and public-sector jobs to global outsourcing and deindustrialization; by the Reagan-Bush cutbacks to welfare and social services; by affluent middle-class flight from L.A.'s center to the suburbs and then onward to various 'edge cities'; and by new waves of transnational migrations, particularly from Central America, driven by counterrevolutionary wars south of the border. The riots were a manifestation of the grievances of intersecting class and race" (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 169).

[131]  Mark Brown and Sky LaRell Anderson, "Designing for Disability: Evaluating the State of Accessibility Design in Video Games," *Games and Culture* 16, no. 6 (2020): 704, https://doi.org/10.1177/155541202097 1500.

[132]  Ibid., 707–12.

[133]  Diane Carr, "Ability, Disability and Dead Space," *Game Studies* 14, no. 2 (2014), https://gamestudies.org/14 02/articles/carr.

[134]  Machine Games, *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*, version Windows (Sweden; USA: Bethesda Softworks, 2017).

[135]  Damian Gałuszka and Dorota Żuchowska-Skiba, "Niepełnosprawność w grach wideo – omówienie na przykładach wybranych wirtualnych postaci," *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej* 14, no. 3 (September 2018): 101–2, https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8069.14.3.06.

[136]  Tiger & squid, *Beyond Eyes*, version Windows (Netherlands; UK: Team17, 2015); The Deep End Games, *Perception*, version Windows (USA: Feardemic, 2017).

play.[137]  I would also add the French-developed fantasy game *A Blind Legend*,[138] where the player controls a blind knight who can only attack enemy figures with the guidance of his accompanying daughter.

## 2.3  Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated that the female presence in digital games has been a constant fight for emancipation, with varying degrees of success. However, an intersectional approach emphasizes that the rediscovery of digital game history should not only include female developers but also explore the barriers they encountered on their path to a career. One such barrier was the selective use of the auteur category, initially appropriated by white heterosexual males. Nonetheless, the auteur category can be reclaimed by females seeking recognition of their subjectivity. In the next chapter, I will explain the evolution the auteur category has *undergone* and must continue to *undergo* to change the discourse surrounding females' activity in the digital game industry.

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137   Gałuszka and Żuchowska-Skiba, "Niepełnosprawność w grach wideo," 103.
138   DOWiNO, *A Blind Legend*, version Windows (France: DOWiNO, 2015).

# Chapter 3

# Who is the Digital Game Auteur?

This chapter provides a defense of the category of "auteur" in digital games to rediscover the intersectional cases of females active within the digital game field. First, describing the debates on individual authorship of cultural texts, I will indicate how I understand the category of "auteur" regarding collective works such as digital games. Then, I will discuss the previous definitions of "auteur" and authorial discourses to develop a theory of game "autrices"—female auteurs.

## 3.1 The Concept of Artist and Authorship

In the arts and humanities, literary works and art are often considered through the prism of an artist's biography. This perspective is a by-product of the 19th-century discourse surrounding artists. By using the term "artists," I adopt Ravia Kelmoees' assertion that the definition of artists is two-fold.

> Firstly, an artist is the author of rules, principles and combinations that probably result in diverse works; secondly an artist is a link in the network of relations, and the 'work' could be a network-related and collective 'object', either software or communicative artwork.[1]

Thus, an artist can be both an innovator and an imitator. Artists may introduce means of expression not seen in previous works. However, they also, or foremost, borrow or steal their techniques from other creators.[2] A prime example is the ready-made sculpture *Fountain*,

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[1]    Raivo Kelomees, "Shared Authorship: Dispersal of the Artist in Electronic Fields," *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 16, no. 3 (2007): 82.

[2]    Ibid., 83.

traditionally attributed to Marcel Duchamp.  A simple urinal became appropriated by Duchamp, but his contribution was likely minimal; even the authorial signature "R Mutt" on *Fountain* was possibly added by Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven.[3]  The example of *Fountain* illustrates how female artists were erased from the art world; I will revisit this point later in the chapter.

The modernist turn in art emphasized the bohemian understanding of artists and authorship. Before the late 19th century, courts or patrons usually commissioned artists to create artworks; these authorial works were part of private collections.  Subsequently, former "court" artists were replaced by often independent exhibition artists, whose works became more accessible to a broader audience.[4]  The modernist turn underscored the "cult of the exile, the Satanic artist who scorns the suburban masses and plucks an elitist virtue out of his enforced dispossession."[5] This individualistic view of artists as visionaries persists in fine arts and literature.

However, what about films, whose creative process is lengthy (from writing a screenplay and selecting the film crew and production to post-production and release)? Films are not the product of just one person.  They involve many crew members, directors, producers, screenwriters, cinematographers, film editors, production designers, and so on.  In film studies (similar to game studies), the 20th-century auteur theory first became associated with the cinematic "politique des auteurs," originating from French film critic Alexandre Astruc.  Astruc differentiated between "metteurs-en-scène" and "auteurs," that is, directors relying on others' scenarios and those who blurred the boundaries between writing their scenarios and shooting them themselves. Astruc, in his famous phrase "L'auteur écrit avec sa caméra comme un écrivain écrit avec un stylo,"[6] insisted on searching for cinematic means of expression that convey the director's personal vision.  However, Astruc's essay ideas were manipulated by critics from the French film magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*:  François Truffaut,[7] Jean-Luc Godard, Éric Rohmer and Jacques Rivette, among others.  Most were associated with the conservative *Arts* magazine, expressing equally traditional views on film art.[8]  They hardly concealed their contempt towards left-wing directors from France and non-French cinema.  They also sympathized with the far

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3     Siri Hustvedt, "A Woman in the Men's Room: When Will the Art World Recognise the Real Artist Behind Duchamp's Fountain?" *The Guardian*, April 3, 2019, https://archive.is/czBsx.

4     Kelomees, "Shared Authorship," 83.

5     Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 21.

6     Alexandre Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo," ed. Peter Graham and Ginette Vincendeau (1948; repr., London: British Film Institute, 2022), https://archive.is/neTX1.

7     See his manifesto: François Truffaut, "A Certain Tendency in French Cinema," in *The French New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, ed. Peter Graham and Ginette Vincendeau (1954; repr., London: British Film Institute, 2009), 38–64, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781838711474.

8     Marco Grosoli, "The Politics and Aesthetics of the 'politique des auteurs'," *Film Criticism* 39, no. 1 (2014): 33–34, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24777962.

right; examples include right-wing anarchist Godard (who in the 1960s superficially converted to Maoism), monarchist Rohmer and openly racist Truffaut.[9] Moreover, they favored classical American directors, who were not coherent in their cinematic vision[10] nor did they find their innovative "cinematic language;" instead, when allowed to make their New Wave films, they turned cinema into literature.[11]

Applying such "politique des auteurs" to digital games may seem problematic. Its reformulation came from Andrew Sarris, who emphasized that the auteur theory distinguished film directors according to three criteria: technical competence, the director's personality, and the interior meaning of the director's works.[12] Predictably, the selective and exclusive use of the "auteur" category met harsh criticism. Pauline Kael used the example of *Citizen Kane*.[13] According to Kael, the film's writer Herman Mankiewicz deserved to be called an auteur more than the director Orson Welles. The titular character was based upon the press industry magnate William Randolph Hearst whom Mankiewicz knew personally, unlike Welles.[14]

Nevertheless, Kael's stance on the auteur theory was hostile and aggressive from the beginning—to the point that she attacked Sarris as "intellectually handicapped," thus demonstrating her inability to engage in a heated discussion productively.[15] While Sarris's proposal may seem reductionist, it is still more applicable when modified to include other types of creators. The auteur category, as a social construct, is still vital in cinematic works for both directors and screenwriters such as Charlie Kaufman.[16] However, it must not turn into "an aesthetic personality cult," a danger expressed by the *Cahiers*' editor-in-chief Bazin.[17]

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[9] Ibid., 36–42.

[10] Ibid., 36–37.

[11] Take Godard, for example. His *Breathless* (Jean-Luc Godard, *Breathless*, Blu-ray (1960; repr., France: StudioCanal, 2020)), in its thread of non-motivated murder, is an unofficial adaptation of André Gide's novel *Les Caves du Vatican* (André Gide, *Les caves du Vatican: sotie* (1914; repr., Paris: Gallimard, 1949)); *Bande à part* (Jean-Luc Godard, *Bande à part*, DVD (1964; repr., France: Gaumont, 2012)) features extensive and patronizing voice-overs, resembling its literary adaptation; *Pierrot le fou* (Jean-Luc Godard, *Pierrot le fou*, DVD (1965; repr., France: StudioCanal, 2009)) mimics the literary 'stream of consciousness' technique, with references to Arthur Rimbaud's literature.

[12] Andrew Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leo Braudy and Cohen Marshall (1962; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 561–62.

[13] Orson Welles, *Citizen Kane*, Blu-ray (RKO Radio Pictures, 1941; United States: Warner Home Video, 2011).

[14] Pauline Kael, "Raising Kane," *The New Yorker*, no. 8 (February 20, 1971), https://archive.is/GrGYg.

[15] Pauline Kael, "Circles and Squares," *Film Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (1963): 22.

[16] David LaRocca, "Unauthorized Biography: Truth and Fact in 'Confessions of a Dangerous Mind'," in *The Philosophy of Charlie Kaufman*, ed. David LaRocca (University Press of Kentucky: Lexington, KY, 2011), 101–4.

[17] André Bazin, "On the Politique Des Auteurs," in *Cahiers Du Cinéma, the 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, ed. Jim Hillier (1957; repr., Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1985), 257.

## 3.2  Post-structural Theory and the Rebirth of the Author/Auteur

A similar problem arises within the context of digital games. A game development studio can vary from one person to several hundred people.[18] Thus, digital games are primarily collective works. Moreover, unlike films—where it is customary to highlight the director's leading role—games have no international conventions that would regulate to whom the personal copyrights belong.[19] Still, claiming that game authors do not exist—a by-product of post-structural theory shaped by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault—is a deathtrap.

In 1968, Roland Barthes published an article procovatively titled "The Death of the Author," whose fragment the following passage:

> The *author* still reigns in histories of literature, biographies of writers, interviews, magazines, as in the very consciousness of men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoirs.[20]

Barthes contends that a person who writes a literary text cannot imbue it with elements of their biography because the author's time of existence is equal to the time of expression, "here and now."[21] For Barthes, a text gains meaning only during the reading process; only the reader can give it meaning, with the initiative being theirs, as seen in his later book *S/Z*:

> writing is not the communication of a message which starts from the author and proceeds to the reader; it is specifically the voice of reading itself: *in the text, only the reader speaks*.[22]

Barthes's thoughts contradicted the idea of the author for ideological reasons. He viewed it as a by-product of the Reformation, modernity, and the capitalist system, which laid the groundwork for cultivating the individual characteristics of twentieth-century totalitarian rule.[23] Michel Foucault similarly addressed the question of authorship. In his essay "What is an Author," Foucault devoted attention to the circumstances of the Christian culture's influence,

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[18]   Dovey and Kennedy, *Game Cultures*, 47–48.

[19]   Pierre-Jean Benghozi and Philippe Chantepie, "Jeu vidéo : une industrie culturelle du 21e siècle sans droits d'auteur," *L'Observatoire* 55, no. 1 (2020): 63, https://doi.org/10.3917/lobs.055.0062.

[20]   Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, by Roland Barthes, trans. Stephen Heath (1969; repr., London: Fontana, 1977), 143.

[21]   Ibid., 145.

[22]   Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (1970; repr., New York: Noonday Press, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1974), 151.

[23]   Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 143.

which established authorship.[24] Foucault treats the word "author" only as a function that refers not to specific individuals but to the discourse surrounding them:

> The 'author-function' is tied to the legal and institutional systems that circumscribe, determine, and articulate the realm of discourses; it does not operate in a uniform manner in all discourses, at all times, and in any given culture; it is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a text to its creator, but through a series of precise and complex procedures; it does not refer, purely and simply, to an actual individual insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and to a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy.[25]

For Foucault, although the author does not exist in literature as a specific person, the continued existence of auteurism in Western social discourses indicates the society that uses this construct.[26] It should be stressed, however, that Barthes and Foucault's repudiation of "authors" remains inconsequential. For example, while problematizing the category of author/auteur, Foucault did not hesitate to acknowledge the "initiators of discursive practices," such as Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud.[27] Moreover, his argumentation is alarming, considering how he treats female authors. Let us examine his statement:

> to say that Ann Radcliffe created the Gothic Romance means that there are certain elements common to her works and to the nineteenth-century Gothic romance: the heroine ruined by her own innocence, the secret fortress that functions as a counter-city, the outlaw-hero who swears revenge on the world that has cursed him, etc… In saying that Freud founded psychoanalysis, we do not simply mean that the concept of libido or the techniques of dream analysis reappear in the writings of Karl Abraham or Melanie Klein, but that he made possible a certain number of differences with respect to his books, concepts, and hypotheses, which all arise out of psychoanalytic discourse.[28]

To put it bluntly, a female author such as Ann Radcliffe is not the "initiator of discursive practices," because her work fades within the formulaic iconography of Gothic Romance.

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[24]   Michel Foucault, "Authorship: What Is an Author?†," *Screen* 20, no. 1 (March 1, 1979): 21, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/20.1.13.
[25]   Ibid., 23.
[26]   Ibid., 19.
[27]   Ibid., 24.
[28]   Ibid., 25.

Meanwhile, Freud—infamously known for his pseudoscientific statement that females (unlike male) desire to have a penis[29]—becomes a grand personality.  The strange contradiction is apparent here:  the author is dead unless he is a man.  Adrian Wilson rightfully states that Foucault's rhetorical maneuvers compromised his more significant questions, such as the subjects' privileged position; Foucault merely "had eliminated just those attributes which the author-figure shares with the figure of the subject."[30]

Similarly, Barthes's statement that writing is "the destruction of every voice, every origin"[31] appears superficial.  It can only be an argument that not specifically the author, but their *text* is actually dead, that is—the author lives, even in a ghostly, hauntological form,[32] as long as their name is discursively spoken (thus making them the subject), while the text remains an inanimate object.[33]  Timothy Corrigan accurately states:

> the figure of the auteur/author remains an important construct, a principle of textual causality like genre and narrative which asks and insists that readers and audiences see the work as whole, complete, and beyond individual differences and inconsistencies.[34]

The circulation of Barthes and Foucault's names in commonplace academic discourse would be sufficiently meaningful in the discussion mentioned above.

Besides, as signaled by the discussion above of Ann Radcliffe, Foucault and Barthes were rightfully accused of harming females' liberation, resulting from reducing one's subjectivity to the derogatory "author-function."[35]  Margaret A. McLaren, summarizing the feminist criticism of Foucault, stated that several feminists accuse him of denying subjectivity as "wholly determined by social forces."[36]  Foucault's critics say that "a subject incapable of moral or political

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29    Cf. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY, USA: Cornell University Press, 1985), 41–42.

30    Adrian Wilson, "Foucault on the "Question of the Author": A Critical Exegesis," *Modern Language Review* 99, no. 2 (2004): 361, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/827409/summary.

31    Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 142.

32    See Jacques Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, trans. Richard Rand (1979; repr., New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 20; Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (London – New York: Routledge, 2003), 7.

33    Timothy Corrigan, "Auteurs and the New Hollywood," in *The New American Cinema*, ed. Jon Lewis (Durham, NC, USA: Duke University Press, 1998), 43.

34    Ibid., 41.

35    Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self* (1994; repr., Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 34; Nancy K. Miller, "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader," in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa De Lauretis (London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 1986), 103–4.

36    Margaret A. McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 2.

agency can only result in quietism."[37] Admittedly, McLaren underlines that this criticism only addresses the middle stage of Foucault's scientific oeuvre and conflicts with his actual political activism.[38] However, Barthes and Foucault's thoughts on auteurism are still problematic. Males proclaimed "the death of the author" without asking females about their stance, just as males had conceptualized artwork authorship without including females.[39]

Meanwhile, numerous females who practice art *want* to articulate their personal experiences. Nancy K. Miller argues that the post-structural negation of authorship, which Barthes and Foucault represented, leaves no discursive space for females and "forecloses the question of identity for them."[40] This foreclosure exposes female artists to the "risk of erasure, or marginalization, of women's names and women's discursive input."[41] Also, Barthes and Foucault acted from their privileged, academic positions of power, making it easier to deny one's subjectivity and authority.[42] Catherine Grant states that the questions of authorial subjectivity are still essential for "feminists theorizing and teaching about women's activities in the field of cultural production," regardless of artwork forms practiced.[43]

The sentence above is a critical remark: *females reject the death of subjectivity imposed by males*. Admittedly, Rosi Braidotti argues that the rejection of rationality paradoxically liberated females from the oppressive rigor of inherently male philosophy.[44] Nevertheless, Braidotti finds hope for females more in the Deleuzian concept of nomadic subjects than the Foucauldian lack of subject; Foucault scarcely studied feminine scholarship and saw females—just like males—only as desexualized bodies.[45]

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid., 57.

[39] Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, "'She Looks Like a Little Piece of Cake': Sofia Coppola and the Commerce of Auteurism," *Interférences Littéraires/Literaire Interferenties* 21 (2017): 118.

[40] Miller, "Changing the Subject," 106.

[41] Paszkiewicz, "'She Looks Like a Little Piece of Cake'," 118.

[42] Shelley Cobb, *Adaptation, Authorship, and Contemporary Women Filmmakers* (Cham: Springer, 2015), 56; Nancy K. Miller, *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 75.

[43] Catherine Grant, "Secret Agents: Feminist Theories of Women's Film Authorship," *Feminist Theory* 2, no. 1 (April 1, 2001): 113, https://doi.org/10.1177/14647000122229325.

[44] Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance: A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 117.

[45] Ibid., 89–90.

## 3.3  The Role of Readers/Authors in Digital Games

This lengthy introduction to the idea of the author's death is necessitated by the fact that media scholars often automatically and, in places, unreflectively quote Barthes and Foucault, arguing for the dilution of a single person's contribution in the flood of databases, artificial intelligence, and collaborative media. For example, influential media scholar Lev Manovich writes: "Roland Barthes's 'death of the author' helped to sway us from the romantic ideal of the artist creating totally from scratch, pulling images directly from his imagination."[46] However, Manovich has little respect for the consistency of his views. This becomes evident when he lauds cinematic auteurs Peter Greenaway and Dziga Vertov:

> Along with Greenaway, Dziga Vertov can be thought of as a major 'cinematic filmmaker' of the twentieth century. *Man with a Movie Camera* is perhaps the most important example of a database imagination in media art.[47]

Wait a moment. If *Man with a Movie Camera*[48] makes the famous Soviet documentarist Dziga Vertov a "major cinematic filmmaker," why abolish the author/auteur category? If we follow Manovich's initial understanding, Vertov would not deserve to be called "major" (simply reifying a person) for one reason. Vertov was not a filmmaker in the sense suggested by Manovich; for his first chronicles, he simply "ordered casual footage" shot by other cinematographers. Only at the editing stage did he transform these chronicles into something more.[49] *Man with a Movie Camera* is indeed Vertov's creative work, but only thanks to inventive montage; it nevertheless thrived on materials shot by other overlooked Soviet cinematographers. Vertov's leading role is not denied in media-oriented discourse. Vertov does not kill authors, as Manovich tries to prove; he demonstrates that everyone can be an author if they creatively rework the found material and dominate the discourse around it.

Barthes's slogan is also forcibly applied to fan studies because, as Lesley Goodman insists, recipients of media frequently "appropriate works, worlds, characters, plots, and settings with

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[46]    Lev Manovich, "1.3: The Aesthetics of Virtual Worlds: Report From Los Angeles," *CTheory*, May 22, 1996, https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14313.

[47]    Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 239, http://archive.org/details/languageofnewmed0000mano.

[48]    Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera* (USSR: All-Ukrainian Photo Cinema Administration, 1929; UK: British Film Institute, 2015).

[49]    David Bordwell, "Dziga Vertov," *Film Comment* 8, no. 1 (1972): 39, https://www-proquest-com.wikipedialibrary.idm.oclc.org/scholarly-journals/dziga-vertov/docview/210264896/se-2.

seemingly little regard for the author's intentions, wishes, or intellectual property."[50] Indeed, fan communities may reject some parts of popular culture works and project their own fan works. Yet, such resistance proves instead the death of *authority*, not the death of the *author*. As it concerns digital games, both the game's producer and its user participate in generating or discovering meanings. Players' grassroots activities—creating game modifications or publishing gameplay transcripts as extended plays, walkthroughs, or let's plays—have made media scholars question digital game authorship or shift it to the players themselves.

However, the ability to make free choices or co-produce the content of digital games is reduced. Alec Charles[51] claims that digital games are not Barthes's "writerly texts," forcing the user to consciously reproduce them during each approach.[52] Nor are they John Fiske's "producerly texts," which encourage user interaction.[53] According to Charles, digital games are "false-writerly" (*faux-scriptibles*); they give their users "the illusion of meaning, power and active participation," which diminishes their audience's desire for agency while pretending to satisfy them.[54] Rowan Tulloch takes a less radical stance than Charles, stating that player agency and expectations "are shaped by the game, but at the same moment, the game only comes into being by their play."[55] Thus, the player-game relationship is a compromise between the player's desires and the game rules suggested by developers.[56]

The authorship-readership tension is not new in collective works and exists even in singular works. Literary thinkers like William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley from the New Criticism movement argued that an author's intentions are neither available nor desirable for judging their literary achievements; hence, one's life is not synonymous with their creative input.[57] Therefore, the author's intention is unnecessary for enjoying a reading. However, the absence of perceived intention does not mean complete freedom for the reader. Umberto Eco's writings state that the author/reader's relationship with the work is a negotiation product. The reader

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[50]   Lesley Goodman, "Disappointing Fans: Fandom, Fictional Theory, and the Death of the Author," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 48, no. 4 (August 2015): 7, https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12223.

[51]   Alec Charles, "Playing With One's Self: Notions of Subjectivity and Agency in Digital Games," *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 3, no. 2 (2009): 281–94, https://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/view/vol3no2-10.

[52]   Barthes, *S/Z*, 4.

[53]   John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 95.

[54]   Charles, "Playing With One's Self," 289.

[55]   Rowan Tulloch, "The Construction of Play: Rules, Restrictions, and the Repressive Hypothesis," *Games and Culture* 9, no. 5 (2014): 335–50, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412014542807, s. 348.

[56]   See Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games*, 27.

[57]   William Kurtz Wimsatt and Monroe Curtis Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Sewanee Review* 54, no. 3 (1946): 468.

interprets the text instead of imposing its meaning,[58] and while no one can indicate its best interpretation, "bad" interpretations based on insufficient evidence still exist.[59] Further studies indicated that the actual author of the work always creates "an implied reader," aware of the authorial style,[60] and "an implied author," their official image judged by the reader.[61] A similar process concerns digital games.

Admittedly, Espen Aarseth underlines that players themselves are both implied and transgressive, i.e. they can follow or reject the rules.[62] However, the game can also follow or compromise the player's decisions. Olli Tapio Leino argues that digital games are "cultural artifacts" whose materiality ignores "the player's thoughts, motivations, and intentions."[63] The player's agency constantly struggles with the game's algorithm, as evidenced by Leino's analysis of *Fallout 3*, where he was caught in a death loop due to bugs in the game design. Of course, Leino's thoughts mainly concern single-player digital games and can hardly be applied to multiplayer games where players create their own culture. Still, the multiplayer games are not included in this dissertation, which focuses on the relationship between implied authors (auteurs) and players.

What can be learned from such a debate? In the case of fan modifications or remakes, the old maxim rings true: "give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:21). Developers should receive credit for their base game content, while the scope of modifications belongs to the creative fan.

## 3.4  Digital Games and the Question of Auteurism

Returning to the question of digital game auteurs, it is possible to generate authorial discourses around these collective works. Instead of searching for the "real" author, I refer to the auteur category contextually. In collective works with diluted creative competence, David Bordwell's

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58   Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (1962; repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 19.

59   Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge – New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 54, 64.

60   Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (1972; repr., Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), xii.

61   Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 137–38.

62   Espen Aarseth, "I Fought the Law: Transgressive Play and The Implied Player," in *DiGRA '07 – Proceedings of the 2007 DiGRA International Conference: Situated Play*, vol. 4 (Tokyo: University of Tokyo, 2007), 130–33.

63   Olli Tapio Leino, "Death Loop as a Feature," *Game Studies* 12, no. 2 (2012), http://gamestudies.org/1202/articles/death_loop_as_a_feature.

neoformalism can help understand the roots of the authorial institution. He noted that in collectively produced films, the auteur is a film critic-shaped "textual unit" that mediates the message and expresses a personal vision.[64] An auteur is an institutional product, functioning similarly to "star" and "genre": it unifies and categorizes different texts according to distinctive motives, styles, and subjects, easing the viewer's navigation within various cultural texts. Moreover, the auteur results from historical processes that shape and co-create its "biographical legend."[65] Bordwell thus argues that this legend prepares the viewer for the film's reception strategy.

Seung-hoon Jeong and Jeremi Szaniawski assert that auteurism did not die despite "losing its semi-religious myth of independent creativity." Jeong and Szaniawski state that "declarations of such passing are most often of a rhetorical nature rather than founded infacts." Meanwhile, the cinematic cult of director-as-auteur persisted due to scholarly practice and audience support.[66] Therefore, instead of the actual game "authorship," one can consider different discourses describing specific agencies within digital game design. Espen Aarseth, drawing heavily from Sarris's theory mentioned above, identifies three premises for labeling a game creator as an auteur:

1. They must have made such an impression that the game is associated with their name, rather than that of the Development Company or publisher.

2. They must have made more than one game.

3. The games must stand out and be different from standard genre games.[67]

In other words, an auteur should possess a recognizable personality, have multiple outputs that can be rationalized, and impart a distinct design style to their games. Aarseth's proposal has been acknowledged by several scholars. For instance, Yavuz Kerem Demirbaş's thesis on game authorship applies Aarseth's suggestion to designers like Sid Meier, Will Wright, and Peter Molyneux. However, since these personalities are well-known among players, Demirbaş argues that critical playing requires increased effort:

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[64]  David Bordwell, "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice," *Film Criticism*, no. 1 (1979): 59.

[65]  David Bordwell, *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 4.

[66]  Seung-hoon Jeong and Jeremi Szaniawski, "Introduction," in *The Global Auteur: The Politics of Authorship in 21st Century Cinema*, ed. Seung-hoon Jeong and Jeremi Szaniawski (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 4.

[67]  Espen Aarseth, "The Game and Its Name: What Is a Game Auteur?" in *Visual Authorship: Creativity and Intentionality in Media*, ed. Torben Kragh Grodal, Bente Larsen, and Iben Thorving Laursen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2004), 263.

> In the cases of Meier, Wright and Molyneux, we can claim that we have found
> our Hitchcocks. But it is easy to say this without critically playing and analyzing
> all the games of these designers… The real work is not in promoting designers to
> auteur status, but in creating a literature around authors.[68]

Demirbaş believes that auteur criticism should bridge game journalism and game studies,
utilizing terminology from both film and game studies. Games are not solely about "telling
stories," but players can use them to narrate on-screen events.[69] Demirbaş asserts that games
are "meaning producing systems," and game critics should examine how auteurs succeed or
fail in communicate these meanings:

> The author can win the player or lose the player. But win/lose conditions are
> not necessarily just satisfaction/frustration conditions. Much like each player
> creates their own in-game goals, different authors can evoke other emotions and
> impressions. The true power of the game auteurs lies in how competent they are in
> playing this meta-game.[70]

While Demirbaş's thesis concentrates on Gonzalo Frasca's procedural games, Dominika
Staszenko applies Aarseth's definition of an auteur to more mainstream game developers, such
as Goichi Suda.[71] First, however, I will introduce the categorization devised by Polish game
scholar Marta Matylda Kania to illustrate different aspects of authorial presence in digital
games.[72]

Kania identifies three authorial discourses relevant to particular digital game contributors,
seen in Table 3.1. The first pertains to *digital artisans*, who are responsible for game develop-
ment due to their direct involvement in game production. Digital artisans view making games a
craft.[73] The second discourse highlights *the guardians of the vision* (later referred to as *vision-
aries*). Their activity is limited to "directing the team constructing the analogon—the computer
game with all its components—in order to make it as truthful to the vision as possible."[74] The

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68  Yavuz Kerem Demirbas, "Towards a New Understanding of Games: Auteur Game Criticism" (Master's
    thesis, ITU, 2008), 43, https://bit.ly/37YNvhP.

69  Ibid., 56.

70  Ibid., 55.

71  Dominika Staszenko, "Lollipop Chainsaw Goichiego Sudy i problem autorstwa w medium gier wideo,"
    *Homo Ludens* 7, no. 2 (2015): 153–62.

72  Marta Matylda Kania, *Perspectives of the Avatar: Sketching the Existential Aesthetics of Digital Games*
    (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej, 2017).

73  Ibid., 13–14.

74  Ibid., 29.

Table 3.1: Excerpt from Maria Matylda Kania's classification of authorial discourses, with own proposal of the "shy decision-makers" category.

| Elements of situatedness of the author | The Digital Artisans | The Guardians of the Vision | The Digital Orators | The Shy Decision Makers |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Focal point | personal experience of the author in the process of making the game | the ideal vision preceding its analogon | the influence of the persuasive representation | crafting similarly themed games under the visionary's guidance |
| Authorial field | everything, artisanry | vision and direction | programming, argumentation | any secondary production element (level design, characters, etc.) |
| Author's major function | the artisan; one-man band | the artist; director; visionary | the activist; programmer | level designer, writer |

final discourse involves *digital orators*, who see games more as procedural arguments than craft or art. The digital orators are primarily programmers and convey their ideological worldview through procedures.[75]

In this section, I will explain Kania's perspective on these authorial discourses and provide examples of individuals fitting these categories. The following chapter will present thorough analyses of selected female auteurs' oeuvre in the digital game industry.

### 3.4.1  Auteurs as Digital Artisans

Kania acknowledges numerous digital artisans, including Anna Anthropy, Philippe Poisson (Phil Fish), and Tommy Refenes, labeling them as inclined toward self-expression.[76] I have discussed Anthropy's output in Chapter 2, so I would like to focus on Poisson first.

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[75]   Ibid., 39–42.
[76]   Ibid., 12–13.

Philippe Poisson exemplifies digital artisans who can be considered *auteurs*. Poisson's highly acclaimed puzzle games *Fez*[77] and *SuperHyperCube*[78] reveal his interest in gameplay experiments, such as blending two- and three-dimensional pixel art. His biographical legend was shaped when the documentary *Indie Game: The Movie*[79] showed his struggle to release *Fez* at all costs, despite conflicts with the game's publisher. The documentary highlights that game design is not only an act of self-expression but also a constant struggle to survive in the digital game field.

Tommy Refenes is a less convincing example. Though Refenes has more than one game in his portfolio, his best-known contribution is programming *Super Meat Boy*,[80] co-designed with Edmund McMillen. Meanwhile, it is McMillen's work that stands out for its coherence. McMillen's games, such as *Super Meat Boy*, *The Binding of Isaac*,[81] and *The End is Nigh*,[82] are characterized by striking imagery, demanding challenges, and loose biblical references.

I would also introduce another example of the digital artisan: Éric Chahi. This French game developer began his gaming career as the sole programmer behind *Le Pacte*[83] or *Another World*.[84] While developing *Heart of Darkness*[85] and *From Dust*,[86] Nevertheless, Chahi could be called a digital artisan due to his recognized biographical legend, multiple developed games, and autobiographical references in his works. For instance, the introductory sequence of *Heart of Darkness* features a boy named Andy, who is humiliated by a demonic teacher in the classroom, resembling Chahi's primary school professor.[87] In *From Dust*, Chahi references the Polynesian cultures and belief systems he explored during several trips to Polynesian islands.[88]

### 3.4.2 Auteurs as Visionaries

Compared to digital artisans, Kania mentions only two examples of game visionaries: Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn (responsible for the Tale of Tales development studio) and Fumito

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77   Polytron Corporation, *Fez*, version Windows (Canada: Trapdoor, 2012).
78   Kokoromi, *SuperHyperCube*, version Windows (Canada: Polytron Corporation, 2016).
79   Oli Welsh, "Indie Game: The Movie Review" (Eurogamer, June 12, 2012), https://bit.ly/3Mq7AAq.
80   Team Meat, *Super Meat Boy*, version Windows (USA: Team Meat, 2010).
81   Edmund McMillen, *The Binding of Isaac*, version Windows (United States, 2011).
82   Edmund McMillen and Tyler Glaiel, *The End Is Nigh*, version Windows (United States, 2017).
83   Éric Chahi, *Le Pacte*, version Amstrad CPC (France: Loriciels, 1986).
84   Éric Chahi, *Another World*, version Amiga (France: Delphine Software, 1991).
85   Amazing Studio, *Heart of Darkness*, version PlayStation (France: Infogrames, 1998).
86   Ubisoft Montpellier, *From Dust*, version Windows (France: Ubisoft, 2010).
87   Daniel Ichbiah, *Éric Chahi : parcours d'un créateur de jeux vidéo français* (Cergy: Pix 'n Love, 2013), 150.
88   Matt Bertz, "From Dust Developer Diary Showcases Stunning Art Direction" (Game Informer, May 6, 2011), https://archive.is/Dsyrn.

Ueda. One might wonder what differentiates digital artisans from visionaries, and Kania provides an answer:

> The guardian of the vision is then keeping watch over the group executing her plans.
> However—in contrast with the digital artisan, who values her solo creation—she
> is not engaging directly with every aspect of the artefact.[89]

A visionary directs a larger group rather than designing their game independently. The Tale of Tales collective group exemplifies such an authorial strategy. Harvey and Samyn relied on external programmers but meticulously planned their projects. They aimed to challenge the mainstream digital game field, rooted in late capitalism.[90] Consequently, their artworks—*The Path*,[91] *The Graveyard*,[92] *Bientôt l'été*,[93] and *Sunset*,[94] among others—do not feature goal-oriented rules that Jesper Juul had once firmly attributed to games.[95] Furthermore, Harvey and Samyn's productions mainly draw on literature; *The Path* represents a dark variant of the classic fairytale *Little Red Riding Hood*,[96] while *Bientôt l'été* refers to French prose novelist Marguerite Duras.[97] It is true that Harvey and Samyn's output has been the subject of numerous scholarly studies.[98] Tale of Tales' software critically challenged the idea of playability primarily associated with digital culture.[99]

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[89]    Kania, *Perspectives of the Avatar*, 33.

[90]    Charles J. Pratt, "The Art History... Of Games? Games As Art May Be A Lost Cause," *Game Developer*, February 8, 2010, https://archive.is/ToT0G.

[91]    Tale of Tales, *The Path*, version Windows (Belgium: Tale of Tales, 2007).

[92]    Tale of Tales, *The Graveyard*, version Windows (Belgium: Tale of Tales, 2008).

[93]    Tale of Tales, *Bientôt l'été*, version Windows (Belgium: Tale of Tales, 2012).

[94]    Tale of Tales, *Sunset*, version Windows (Belgium: Tale of Tales, 2015).

[95]    Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Rules* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005).

[96]    See Cosima Rughinis, Răzvan Rughinis, and Elisabeta Toma, "Three Shadowed Dimensions of Feminine Presence in Video Games," in *Proceedings of 1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG*, vol. 13 (1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG, Dundee: Abertay University, 2016), 5, https://bit.ly/3G933y5.

[97]    Andrew Webster, "'Bientôt l'été': Finally, a Video Game as Artistic and Hard to Understand as French Films" (The Verge, January 2, 2013), https://archive.is/uYMyc.

[98]    Astrid Ensslin, "Video Games as Unnatural Narratives," in *Diversity of Play*, ed. Mathias Fuchs (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2015), 41–72, https://doi.org/10.14619/012; Maria Cohut, "The Gothic Landscape of Tale of Tales Games: Unresolved Quests for Meaning," in *New Directions in 21st-Century Gothic: The Gothic Compass*, ed. Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Donna Lee Brien (London: Routledge, 2015), 24–38, https://books.google.com?id=uGahCAAAQBAJ; Mathias Fuchs, "Gamification as Twenty-First-Century Ideology," *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 6, no. 2 (June 1, 2014): 143–57, https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.6.2.143_1.

[99]    Fuchs, "Gamification as Twenty-First-Century Ideology," 152.

Fumito Ueda, a Japanese game director, is also considered an auteur due to his ascetically designed productions: *Ico*[100] and *Shadow of the Colossus*.[101]  Juraj Maliček characterizes Ueda's output in such a way:

> *ICO*… was more contemplative-meditative rather than hedonistic-orgiastic, it was more silent and slow rather than fast and loud, subtle rather than crude, rather Apollonian than Dionysian, rather introversial than extroversial… *ICO* made sure that when *Shadow of the Colossus* came out on the same platform in 2005 it was no longer just a video game but it was the second video game of Fumito Ueda. The Fumito Ueda, the author of *ICO*.[102]

Though Maliček's statement is quite romantic in its pathos, it demonstrates the auteur theory in its developmental process. Ueda became an auteur with his second game, like in Aarseth's proposal, and also fit the "guardian of the vision" label mentioned by Kania. Of course, the visionary's discourse includes many more game directors labeled as auteurs. However, I would emphasize that there are two types of game directors: those focusing on game mechanics or non-ludic means of expression.

The first category would include, among others, Shigeru Miyamoto, the Japanese director responsible for *Donkey Kong*,[103] *Super Mario Bros.*,[104] and *The Legend of Zelda*.[105]  Miyamoto's directing style is based on demanding, transparent arcade mechanics, with most of his games intended for a younger audience. During his tenure at Nintendo, Miyamoto served the company by developing intuitively designed, highly playable, and non-hazardous projects.[106]

The second category would apply to French director David Cage. Some argue that Cage's games are racist and misogynistic,[107] contain inconsistent plots,[108] and promote the harmful

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[100]    Japan Studio and Team Ico, *Ico*, version PlayStation 2 (Japan: Sony Computer Entertainment, 2001).

[101]    Japan Studio and Team Ico, *Shadow of the Colossus*, version PlayStation 2 (Japan: Sony Computer Entertainment, 2005).

[102]    Juraj Malíček, "Shadow of the Colossus," *Acta Ludologica* 1, no. 1 (2018): 56, https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=659973.

[103]    Nintendo, *Donkey Kong*, version Arcade (Japan: Nintendo, 1982).

[104]    Nintendo, *Super Mario Bros.*, version Nintendo Entertainment System (Japan: Nintendo, 1984).

[105]    Nintendo, *The Legend of Zelda*, version Nintendo entertainment system (Japan: Nintendo, 1986).

[106]    Zev Borow, "Why Nintendo Won't Grow Up," *Wired*, January 1, 2003, https://www.wired.com/2003/01/nintendo-4/; Simon Parkin, "Is Shigeru Miyamoto's Game Over at Nintendo?" *The Guardian*, April 26, 2012, http://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2012/apr/26/shigeru-miyamotos-game-over-nintendo.

[107]    Matt Gerardi, "Heavy Rain Developer Quantic Dream Accused of Being a Hostile, Sexist Workplace" (The A.V. Club, January 15, 2018), https://www.avclub.com/heavy-rain-developer-quantic-dream-accused-of-being-a-h-1822093463.

[108]    Nick Dinicola, "Thematic Confusion in the Branching Narratives of Video Games" (PopMatters, September 2, 2011), https://www.popmatters.com/147067-thematic-confusion-2495959846.html.

notion that games should merely mimic cinematic means of expression. These criticisms are valid, as are accusations of oppressive work conditions imposed by Cage on his employees.[109] However, it is important to note that Cage is highly consistent in his method. At least four games he directed—*Fahrenheit*,[110] *Heavy Rain*,[111] *Beyond: Two Souls*,[112] and *Detroit: Become Human*—[113]require constant decision-making affecting possible endings, quick yet careful exploration of the game environment, and efficient responsiveness to quick-time events. Additionally, these four games utilize hyperrealistic three-dimensional environments and recreate the United States as a nightmarish country full of psychopaths (*Heavy Rain*), poverty (*Beyond*), and social inequality (*Detroit*).

### 3.4.3 Auteurs as Digital Orators

Meanwhile, Kania indicates that only one auteur treats digital games as procedural arguments. Paolo Pedercini from the Italian collective Molleindustria, known for politically involved, provocative, and explicit games directed against late capitalism, is such an auteur. Notably, *McDonald's Video Game*,[114] *Every Day the Same Dream*,[115] and *The Best Amendment*[116] received significant media and scholarly coverage.[117] Pedercini's presence coincided with Ian Bogost's concept of "procedural rhetoric"—that is, game mechanics and procedures that help the player understand complex social or political processes:

> Processes define the way things work: the methods, techniques, and logics that drive the operation of systems, from mechanical systems like engines to organizational systems like high schools to conceptual systems like religious faith.[118]

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[109] Dean Takahashi, "How Quantic Dream Defended Itself Against Allegations of a 'Toxic Culture'" (VentureBeat, February 27, 2020), https://venturebeat.com/2020/02/27/how-quantic-dream-defended-itself-against-allegations-of-a-toxic-culture/.

[110] Quantic Dream, *Fahrenheit*, version Windows (France: Atari, 2004).

[111] Quantic Dream, *Heavy Rain*, version Windows (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2010; France, 2019).

[112] Quantic Dream, *Beyond: Two Souls*, version PlayStation 4 (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2013; France, 2019).

[113] Quantic Dream, *Detroit: Become Human*, version PlayStation 4 (France: Sony Computer Entertainment, 2018).

[114] Molleindustria, *McDonald's Video Game*, version Flash (Italy: Molleindustria, 2006).

[115] Molleindustria, *Every Day the Same Dream*, version Flash (Italy: Molleindustria, 2009).

[116] Molleindustria, *The Best Amendment*, version Flash (Italy: Molleindustria, 2013).

[117] Braxton Soderman, "Every Game the Same Dream? Politics, Representation, and the Interpretation of Video Games," *Dichtung Digital. Journal Für Kunst Und Kultur Digitaler Medien* 40, no. 12 (2010): 29–30, https://doi.org/10.25969/MEDIAREP/17734; Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

[118] Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 2–3.

Pedercini's games exemplify such processes. *McDonald's Video Game*, an anti-advergame designed to mock McDonald's rise, demonstrates the methods behind delivering fast food to its clients: chopping down trees for plantations in South America, mass cattle slaughtering, and bribing lawyers. While *McDonald's Video Game* demonstrates how late capitalism rose, *Every Day the Same Dream* indicates subtle ways to fight it. Set in a Kafkaesque universe defined by monotonous office work, *Every Day the Same Dream* urges revolt against such working conditions by avoiding office work. *The Best Amendment*, in turn, mocks the U.S. gun rights advocacy group National Rifle Association. Its vice president Wayne LaPierre defended the NRA against accusations of perpetrating mass violence and shootings: "The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun."[119] Pedercini procedurally parodies such a statement. The player steers a "white" avatar who becomes a non-playable "black" avatar when he kills the previously controlled characters, with their movement accurately repeating the former player's actions. Consequently, the game space quickly becomes a mass shooting area where the "other self" can kill the currently steered avatar. Thus, *The Last Amendment* shows that the person who kills anyone with a gun is not a "good guy" but a murderer.

Lucas Pope—regarding his two games: *The Republia Times* and *Papers, Please*—can also be considered a digital orator who owes much to proceduralism. *The Republia Times*[120] and *Papers, Please*[121] simulate living in the Soviet Union-like fictional autocratic regimes. In *The Republia Times*, the player impersonates an editor-in-chief of the titular official propaganda journal; in *Papers, Please*, they embody a customs officer on whom migrating citizens' lives depend. The player's situation is complicated; the avatar has a dependent family, and their pay depends on obedience to authority. Unfortunately, neither of these games contains a morally uplifting ending. *The Republia Times*' avatar can be killed by officers (if the player decides to place headlines supporting the opposition in the newspaper) or anti-government partisans (if they remain in the regime's service). *Papers, Please* further nuances the danger of the main character's situation. The avatar can be arrested on multiple pretexts, regardless of whether they are denounced due to good deeds towards dissidents or simply prove incompetent at work (e.g., by not following procedures due to the player's fault).

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[119]  Cf. George Skelton, "Capitol Journal: Dallas Tragedy Proves a Good Guy with a Gun Shouldn't Be the Only Thing That Stops a Bad Guy with a Gun," *Los Angeles Times*, July 11, 2016, https://lat.ms/3Hb44Gc.
[120]  Lucas Pope, *The Republia Times*, version Web (United States, 2012), http://pope.jeffsys.net/index.php#trt.
[121]  Lucas Pope, *Papers, Please*, version Windows (United States: 3909 LLC, 2013).

Meanwhile, the "digital orator" discourse is not evident in games by either Jason Rohrer or Jonathan Blow, as Miguel Sicart[122] suggests. Bearing in mind Kania's research, one might get the impression that Sicart confuses the "digital orator" strategy with the "digital artisan" one when he tries to label Rohrer and Blow as "proceduralists."[123] Theresa Claire Devine argues that Rohrer "has made it clear in his written and verbal artifacts that he is an artist, and he is making art in the game medium."[124] Moreover, according to Devine, Rohrer "explores possibilities without being didactic."[125] Thus, Sicart's charge against proceduralists—whom he understands similarly to digital orators, as creators imposing their views and ways of player-game interaction—completely misses the point.[126] Likewise, Blow's *Braid*[127] contains no specific algorithmic message. Instead, Conor McKeown, who disputes with previous readers of *Braid*, stresses that Blow drew inspiration from a quantum theory of time. According to McKeown, the game poses unanswered existential questions about whether "we must make our own choices and see how they unfold" rather than offering clear procedural answers.[128]

### 3.4.4 Auteurs as Shy Decision-Makers: Suggesting Another Category

While indeed insightful, Kania's classification of the three authorial discourses deserves further exploration. Here, I would like to introduce the category named *shy decision-makers*. It refers to creators who stood in the shadow of visionaries and performed secondary functions, such as level design. Yet, their presence deeply affected the meaning of the games to which they contributed. In short, a shy decision-maker is a person underestimated but historically essential to the game's success (Table 3.1).

One can place personalities such as Zied Rieke among the male shy decision-makers. While working for studios like 2015, Inc., Infinity Ward, Respawn Entertainment, and Naughty Dog, Rieke proved himself a skilled game level designer. Most titles he worked on, like *Medal of*

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122  Miguel Sicart, "Against Procedurality," *Game Studies* 11, no. 3 (2011), http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/sicart.

123  Ibid., sect. 2.

124  Theresa Claire Devine, "Integrating Games Into the Artworld: A Methodology and Case Study Exploring the Work of Jason Rohrer," *Games and Culture* 12, no. 7-8 (November 2017): 685, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015596105.

125  Ibid., 682.

126  Sicart, "Against Procedurality", sect. 2.

127  Jonathan Blow, *Braid*, version Windows (USA: Number None, 2008).

128  Conor McKeown, "Reappraising Braid After a Quantum Theory of Time," *Philosophies* 4, no. 4 (2019): 69, https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies4040055.

*Honor: Allied Assault*,[129] *Call of Duty*,[130] and *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*,[131] are linearly designed and intensely action-packed shooting games. What interested Rieke was depicting the most "fun" fragments of actual or imagined conflicts, with particular emphasis on "working together with your buddies to survive"[132].

As another example, one can consider French writer Hubert Chardot. Chardot contributed to numerous Lovecraft-inspired horror games published by Infogrames, such as *Alone in the Dark*,[133] *Shadow of the Comet*,[134] and *Prisoner of Ice*.[135] Of course, Chardot occupied an often unnoticed writer's position, especially concerning *Alone in the Dark*, for which director Frédérick Raynal is regarded as the principal author. However, Chardot had an excellent feel for Lovecraft's world and was responsible for the storyline of Infogrames' games set in the Cthulhu universe.[136]

Likewise, one can recognize similarities between games credited by Soren Johnson, like *Civilization III*,[137] *Civilization IV*,[138] and *Spore*.[139] Johnson, overshadowed by Sid Meier (responsible for the *Civilization* franchise) and Will Wright (*Spore*'s chief designer), significantly contributed to the success of games officially signed by his supervisors. Johnson's specialties were worldly life-and-humanity simulations, emphasizing the role of artificial intelligence, which is not entirely hostile to the player (as Johnson is an AI designer). In one interview, he said, "I'm not looking for the AI to wipe you out or to win. In fact, there's a lot of things that the AI just doesn't do, that it could do."[140]

Thus, being a shy decision-maker primarily means being eclipsed by superior visionaries. Nevertheless, shy decision-makers may still impact the content of multiple digital games. They understand how the medium functions, and although they may not be programmers, they can alter the game's meaning. This is because they represent a counterpart of what Deleuze and

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[129]  2015, Inc., *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*, version Windows (United States: Electronic Arts, 2002).

[130]  Infinity Ward, *Call of Duty*, version Windows (USA: Activision, 2003).

[131]  Infinity Ward, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, version Windows (USA: Activision, 2007).

[132]  Zied Rieke and John Carswell, "Developers' Corner – Call of Duty" (Game Chronicles, 2003), http://www.gamechronicles.com/qa/cod/cod.htm.

[133]  Infogrames, *Alone in the Dark*, version DOS (France: Infogrames, 1992).

[134]  Infogrames, *Shadow of the Comet*, version DOS (France: Infogrames, 1993).

[135]  Infogrames, *Prisoner of Ice*, version DOS (France: Infogrames, 1995).

[136]  Thomas Ribault, "Alone in the Dark" (Hardcore Gaming 101, September 26, 2017), http://www.hardcoregaming101.net/alone-in-the-dark/.

[137]  Firaxis Games, *Sid Meier's Civilization III*, version Windows (United States: Infogrames, 2001).

[138]  Firaxis Games, *Sid Meier's Civilization IV*, version Windows (United States: 2K Games, 2005).

[139]  Maxis Software, *Spore*, version Windows (United States: Electronic Arts, 2008).

[140]  Cf. Chris Remo, "Interview: Soren Johnson – Spore's Strategist" (Gamasutra, July 11, 2008), https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3722/interview_soren_johnson__spores_.php.

Guattari called "minor literature,"[141] speaking from a marginal position within the cultural field.

## 3.5 Conclusions

The methodological approaches to digital game authorship proposed by Aarseth, Staszenko, and later Kania, allow for a partial reconstruction of the auteur theory. Here, I need to stress that auteurism can manifest itself in various authorial discourses. Although games are mainly collective works, the auteur category *can*—and *should*—be elastic. Different discourses around auteurs/autrices do not prove "the death of the author;" instead, they emphasize that the auteur category is *dispersed*. Although many game developers occupy different positions while working on multiple games, they can exist as auteurs/autrices within such a dispersal. The four authorial discourses (proposed by Kania and me) may demonstrate that individual developers can coexist with others and still become auteurs/autrices. Auteurism is not a line of progress; it is a net that developers may explore in various directions.

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[141]    Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (1975; repr., Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

# Chapter 4

# Intersectional Approach to the Category of the Auteur in Digital Games: Case Studies

In this chapter, I attempt to renew the auteur theory, citing the examples of four female game developers. They were assigned to various authorial discourses: the three proposed by Kania and the fourth, my proposal.

The key by which I selected the examples was also the identity of the female creators. Christine Love (the digital artisan), personally responsible for most of her contributed games, is a Canadian LGBT person. Muriel Tramis (visionary), who mostly functioned as a "project manager" or "product manager" behind her contributions, is an African Caribbean. Elizabeth LaPensée (the digital orator), who primarily programmed her contributions for educational and persuasive purposes, is an Anishinaabe. Finally, Meg Jayanth (the shy decision-maker), occupying the writer's position, is a British Indian.

## 4.1  Materials and Methods

At the end of Chapter 3, I mentioned that the auteur category is *dispersed*. During the game development process, game developers may change positions from one production to another. Typically, game developers have to cooperate with other people, and the work division complicates the strict use of the auteur theory (commonly seen as applying only to one-person works). Still, the auteur category is negotiable. While an individual's effort in multiple games may change over time, it does not mean that this individual cannot be called an auteur. I assume that the auteur category can reveal itself in diverse ways:

- The auteur can communicate with the player during gameplay, suggesting ways to resolve issues and obstacles related to the ludic aspects of the game.
- The auteur can steer the game course by including fixed narrative elements to maintain the story flow.
- The auteur can use interface and algorithmic persuasion to affect the player's point of view.
- The auteur can guide the player's reaction to game events by referencing other cultural texts.

For the reasons above, I suggest applying the method that German literary scholar Astrid Ensslin calls functional ludostylistics.[1]  The research tool developed by Ensslin is flexible because it encompasses a diversity of ludic and literary software and considers various game-player interactions. Ensslin distinguishes four components by which one can study this software, later referred to in bracketed letters:

- **The ludology component** [L] relies on achievements made by game studies founders and ludologists. It covers rules [L1], gameplay [L2], game architecture [L3], victory and termination conditions [L4], agency [L5].[2]

- **The ludonarratology component** [N] focuses on the in-game narrative, including game settings [N1], characters' points of view [N2], the player's avatar and non-playable characters [N3], and plot types [N4].[3]  However, it also covers external narrativity in such forms as walkthroughs [N4].

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1   Astrid Ensslin, *Literary Gaming* (Cambridge, Massachusetts ; London, England: The MIT Press, 2014), 53–54.

2   See Espen Aarseth, "Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis," in *Game Approaches / Spil-Veje. Papers from Spilforskning.Dk Conference* (Melbourne: Spilforskning.dk, 2003), 1–7, https://bit.ly/43coZnF; Jesper Juul, "The Game, the Player, the World: Looking for a Heart of Gameness," in *DiGRA Conference Proceedings 2003* (Utrecht: Utrecht University and Digital Games Research Association, 2003), 30–45, https://bit.ly/45bM1Nv; Maria Garda, *Interaktywne fantasy. Gatunek w grach cyfrowych* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2016); Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (1961; repr., Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001). Note that I omitted some unnecessary parts of the ludology component, such as types of play, risks and challenges, and feedback. Discussing players' different styles of progress is unnecessary because I focus on single-player digital games. Likewise, a discussion of game genres on specific examples would barely suit the topic of this thesis (which is not genological); analyzing feedback (like rewards or penalties) or risks and challenges facing the player rather falls within the realm of procedural rhetoric that persuasively affects possible solutions.

3   Sebastian Domsch, *Storyplaying* (Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter, 2013); Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca – New York: Cornell University Press, 1980).

- **The ludosemiotics component** [S] encompasses the games' meaning layer. It includes an interface (graphics and game world appearance) [S1], the in-game verbal language [S2], discursive and social embedding [S3], procedural rhetoric [S4],[4] and multimodality [S5], understood here as overlapping semiotic modes such as text, sound, images, gestures.[5]

- **The mediality component** [M] covers gamic technical aspects like platform [M1], software [M2], hardware [M3], and ergodicity [M4], which is understood as the possibility of choosing from different paths affecting the game action.[6] Ensslin also identifies means of expression which rely on references to other cultural texts via remediation and intertextuality [M5].[7]

The following case studies cover the selected games of the creators mentioned above. Regarding Muriel Tramis, her output is impressive. Tramis has credit for numerous educational games, including the children-oriented *Adi* franchise and mostly subpar licensed adaptations of comic books and Disney animated films. However, I would like to focus on three characteristics of her output: anti-racism/postcolonialism, feminist eroticism, and hybridity. These three motifs appear in the following games, which I decided were worth examining: *Méwilo*,[8] *Freedom*,[9] *Emmanuelle*,[10] *Geisha*,[11] *Fascination*,[12] *Gobliiins*,[13] *Gobliins 2: The Prince Buffoon*,[14] *Goblins 3*,[15] *Lost in Time*,[16] *Woodruff and the Schnibble of Azimuth*.[17] Tramis was not personally responsible for their programming. Instead, she designed or co-designed them (which justifies labeling her as the visionary). Their programming was delegated to Coktel Vision's internal

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[4]  Algorithmic persuasion, see Bogost, *Persuasive Games*.

[5]  Gunther Kress, *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication* (London – New York: Routledge, 2009).

[6]  Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore and London: JHU Press, 1997).

[7]  Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003); Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

[8]  Coktel Vision, *Méwilo*.

[9]  Coktel Vision, *Freedom*.

[10]  Tomahawk, *Emmanuelle*, version Atari ST (France: Coktel Vision, 1989).

[11]  Tomahawk, *Geisha*, version Amiga (France: Coktel Vision, 1990).

[12]  Tomahawk, *Fascination*, version Amiga (France: Coktel Vision, 1991).

[13]  Coktel Vision, *Gobliiins*, version Amiga (France: Sierra On-Line, 1991).

[14]  Coktel Vision, *Gobliins 2: The Prince Buffoon*, version DOS (France: Sierra On-Line, 1992).

[15]  Coktel Vision, *Goblins 3*, version DOS (France: Sierra On-Line, 1993).

[16]  Coktel Vision, *Lost in Time*, version DOS (France: Sierra On-Line, 1993).

[17]  Coktel Vision, *Woodruff and the Schnibble of Azimuth*, version Windows (France: Sierra On-Line, 1994).

studio M.D.O.: Mathieu Marciacq, Arnaud Delrue, and Roland Oskian.[18] Additionally, Tramis collaborated with painter-surrealist Pierre Gilhodes while working on the *Gobliiins* trilogy and *Woodruff*. However, this remark does not diminish Tramis's merit as a visionary. *Urban Runner*,[19] for which Tramis directed the full-motion video scenes and interior design, was the last examined game credited to Tramis.

From the digital games credited to LaPensée, I chose *Venture Arctic*,[20] *Ninagamomin Ji-nanaandawi'iwe* (*We Sing for Healing*),[21] *Invaders*,[22] *Mikan*,[23] *Coyote Quest*,[24] *Thunderbird Strike*,[25] *When Rivers Were Trails*.[26] Only these works were available for me while writing the thesis. Although LaPensée figured in them only as a writer (and sporadically as an artist), one can label her as a digital orator due to her direct social and political activism.

Christine Love's analyzed works included self-published games like *Digital: A Love Story*,[27] *Love and Order*,[28] *don't take it personally, babe, it just ain't your story*,[29] *Analogue: A Hate Story*,[30] *Ladykiller in a Bind*,[31] and *Get in That Car, Loser*.[32] Love was their writer, designer, and publisher; her self-sufficiency allows me to consider her a digital artisan. In comparison, Meg Jayanth's researched contribution as a writer or a guest writer included *Samsara*,[33] *80 Days*,[34] *Sunless Sea*,[35] *Horizon Zero Dawn*,[36] *Sunless Skies*,[37] and *Falcon Age*.[38]

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[18]   "Coktel Vision – compagnie de jeux vidéo" (Abandonware France), accessed May 2, 2021, https://www.abandonware-france.org/compagnies/coktel-vision-238/.

[19]   Coktel Vision, *Urban Runner*, version Windows (France and USA: Sierra On-Line, 1996).

[20]   Pocketwatch Games, *Venture Arctic*, version WIndows (United States: Pocketwatch Games, 2007).

[21]   Elizabeth LaPensée, *Ninagamomin Ji-Nanaandawi'iwe*, version Web (USA: Survivance, 2015), https://bit.ly/43hDF5f.

[22]   Elizabeth LaPensée, *Invaders*, version Web (USA: Survivance, 2015), https://bit.ly/3BJnJgo.

[23]   Elizabeth LaPensée, *Mikan*, version Web (USA: itch.io, 2017), https://bit.ly/43cpXAj.

[24]   Ibid.

[25]   Elizabeth LaPensée, *Thunderbird Strike*, version Windows (USA: itch.io, 2017), https://bit.ly/3MonyvA.

[26]   Indian Land Tenure Foundation, *When Rivers Were Trails*, version Windows (USA: Michigan State University's Games for Entertainment and Learning Lab, 2019).

[27]   Christine Love, *Digital: A Love Story*, version Windows (USA: Love Conquers All Games, 2010).

[28]   Riva Celso and Christine Love, *Love and Order*, version Windows (Canada: Winter Wolves, 2011).

[29]   Christine Love, *Don't Take It Personally, Babe, It Just Ain't Your Story*, version Windows (USA: Love Conquers All Games, 2011).

[30]   Christine Love, *Analogue: A Hate Story*, version Windows (Canada: Love Conquers All Games, 2012).

[31]   Christine Love, *Ladykiller in a Bind*, version Windows (Canada: Love Conquers All Games, 2016).

[32]   Christine Love, *Get in That Car, Loser!*, version Windows (Canada: Love Conquers All Games, 2021).

[33]   Failbetter Games, *Samsara*, version Web (Failbetter Games, 2010).

[34]   Inkle Ltd., *80 Days*, version Windows (United Kingdom: Inkle Ltd., 2014).

[35]   Failbetter Games, *Sunless Sea*, version Windows (United Kingdom: Failbetter Games, 2015).

[36]   Guerrilla Games, *Horizon Zero Dawn*, version Windows (Netherlands and United States: Sony Computer Entertainment America, 2017).

[37]   Failbetter Games, *Sunless Skies*, version Windows (United Kingdom: Failbetter Games, 2019).

[38]   Outerloop Games, *Falcon Age*, version Windows (United Kingdom: Outerloop Games, 2019).

## 4.2 Muriel Tramis: The Visionary

### 4.2.1 Context: Martinique

When French settlers occupied Martinique in 1635, it became an arena for genocide and slavery. The settlers nearly decimated the Arawak people, who had lived there before. In place of the exterminated natives, physically stronger enslaved Black people were transported from Africa. The island changed hands between 1756 and 1815: the British periodically occupied it during the Seven Years' War and the Napoleonic Wars. However, the condition of the Black Atlantic people remained unchanged as they were forced to work on sugar plantations established after 1660. Consequently, the demographic structure of Martinique rapidly changed. According to John Victor Singler's estimates, the percentage of Africans, Indians, and people of mixed ethnicity between 1660 and 1700 increased from 51.5% to 69.7%.[39] This statistic evidenced the increased slave trade and creolization, or mixing of cultures and races. Thus, although the Black Atlantic diaspora in Martinique differed internally (depending on tribal identity), they became increasingly united during colonial oppression:

> Successive generations subjected to creolization produced a new social and cultural system, marked by the education and use of the Creole, modes of organization inherited from the society of origin but also determined depending on the challenges accompanying work at home. Evaluation of work in the dwelling, personal status in the African culture of birth, and even personal charisma formed a hierarchy recognized by slaves. This hierarchy, based partly on cultural background and mutual solidarity, chalks up slave societies. Festivals, dances, and carnivals were social occasions. Music and dance were passed down from generation to generation during these events, losing most of their sacred qualities but creating the cultural heritage valued today.[40]

As recently as 1847, Martinique had nearly 73,000 enslaved people out of a population of 121,000.[41] However, from the beginning of the 19th century, there was a gradual increase in

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[39] John Victor Singler, "The Demographics of Creole Genesis in the Caribbean: A Comparison of Martinique and Haiti," in *The Early Stages of Creolization*, ed. Jacques Arends (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1996), 210.

[40] Collectivité Territoriale de Martinique, "Le quotidien des esclaves" (L'esclavage à la Martinique), accessed August 30, 2020, http://esclavage-martinique.patrimoines-martinique.org/quotidien-esclaves.html.

[41] Léo Elisabeth, "En quoi l'esclavage est-il menacé ?" in *L'esclave et les plantations*, ed. Philippe Hroděj (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009), para. 54, http://books.openedition.org/pur/97697.

the number of free people of mixed race who assisted enslaved people in claiming their rights. They laid the foundation for the abolition movement. Its growth was accelerated by reforms enacted by Ange Réné Armand's minister of the navy, Baron de Mackau, between 1843 and 1847. De Mackau's ordinances aimed to have the state take over the right to try enslaved people, previously held by plantation owners.[42] Finally, on March 25, 1848, the French government formally abolished slavery in Martinique, and Afro-Caribbeans received civil rights.[43]

Nevertheless, one must bear in mind that only the February Revolution influenced the French government's decision. Thus, it did not mean granting independence to the island or property to the formerly enslaved people.[44] Riots by freed Afro-Caribbeans demanding land ownership were quickly quelled.[45] Furthermore, discrimination against people of color on the island did not entirely disappear, as French jurisdiction did not protect non-Martinican immigrants from the Maghreb, India, or China.[46] In contrast, Afro-Caribbeans who migrated to the French metropolis for work have long been unable to find their way in France.[47] Despite the *négritude* movement's attempts, Martinique still has not been a sovereign state and only changed its status to an overseas department in 1952.

### 4.2.2  Short Biography

Tramis, born in Martinique, recalled not learning about her native island's past from school textbooks. Education in the overseas departments was the same as in metropolitan France. Tramis said, "I knew more about French history than about the history of the Caribbean region, and I knew more about the wolf, the fox, and the weasel… than about my familiar environment."[48] Her perspective changed in 1972 when she began attending high school. Tramis acquired political awareness thanks to a rebellious schoolmate and started reading

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[42]   Ibid., paras. 52–53.

[43]   Frédéric Régent, "Préjugé de couleur, esclavage et citoyennetés dans les colonies françaises (1789-1848)," *La Révolution française*, no. 9 (November 17, 2015): paras. 85–87, https://doi.org/10.4000/lrf.1403.

[44]   Collectivité Territoriale de Martinique, "1848 et après" (L'esclavage à la Martinique), accessed August 30, 2020, http://esclavage-martinique.patrimoines-martinique.org/1848-et-après.html.

[45]   Ibid.

[46]   Michel Giraud et al., "La Guadeloupe et la Martinique dans l'histoire française des migrations en régions de 1848 à nos jours," *Hommes & Migrations* 1278, no. 2 (2009): paras. 24–27, https://doi.org/10.4000/hommesmigrations.252; Régent, "Préjugé de couleur, esclavage et citoyennetés dans les colonies françaises (1789-1848)," para. 91.

[47]   Giraud et al., "La Guadeloupe et la Martinique dans l'histoire française des migrations en régions de 1848 à nos jours," para. 91.

[48]   Filip Jankowski and Muriel Tramis, "A Propos de l'interview" (e-mail, January 21, 2019).

the writings of Frantz Fanon and Édouard Glissant. The classmate was Patrick Chamoiseau himself.[49]

In 1975, Tramis entered the ISEP (Institut supérieur d'électronique de Paris) in Paris, where she studied engineering. After graduating from ISEP, Tramis worked for five years at the state-owned aerospace consortium Aérospatiale, developing software for crewless aerial vehicles. In 1986, however, Tramis left Aérospatiale. Wanting to pursue a nonmilitary occupation—digital game development—she joined the Coktel Vision studio, founded in 1984 by two tandems: Roland and Catherine Oskian and Jean-Michel and Manuelle Mauger. Before hiring Tramis, however, Coktel Vision had no particular achievements in software. The future creator of *Méwilo*, in an interview with Alenda Y. Chang, explained her circumstances of admission to Coktel Vision:

> My publisher […] explained that I gained his trust in managing various projects. My engineering background allowed me to understand technical issues and interact with programmers and technical specialists in teams. At the same time, I had a literary and artistic experience. It is worth noting that most of Coktel Vision's flagship titles were driven by artists with powerful imaginations (Yannick Chosse, Pierre Gilhodes) whom the CEO trusted, not developers. It is clear to me that the film industry, the animation industry, and the video game industry will indeed become convergent.[50]

With her wide-ranging interests, Tramis earned the credit of Coktel Vision. She put it to good use by organizing the games' production. However, she did not necessarily contribute to all of them. Therefore, I propose to generalize the Martinique author's oeuvre by focusing on the common themes explored in her games: colonialism, feminism, and finally, cultural *métissage*. Here, I would like to return to the persona of Patrick Chamoiseau, for it is from his collaboration with Tramis that two of the most outstanding works of her career emerged.

### 4.2.3  *Méwilo* (1987)

The first game by Tramis and Chamoiseau, *Méwilo*, was released in 1987 and immediately made a strong entrance into the digital gaming industry. Moreover, it appeared to be a significant

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[49]  Ibid.

[50]  Cf. Alenda Y. Chang, "Une Vie Bien Jouée/A Life Well Played: The Cultural Legacy of Game Designer Muriel Tramis," *Feminist Media Histories* 6, no. 1 (2020): 147–62, https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2020.6.1.147.
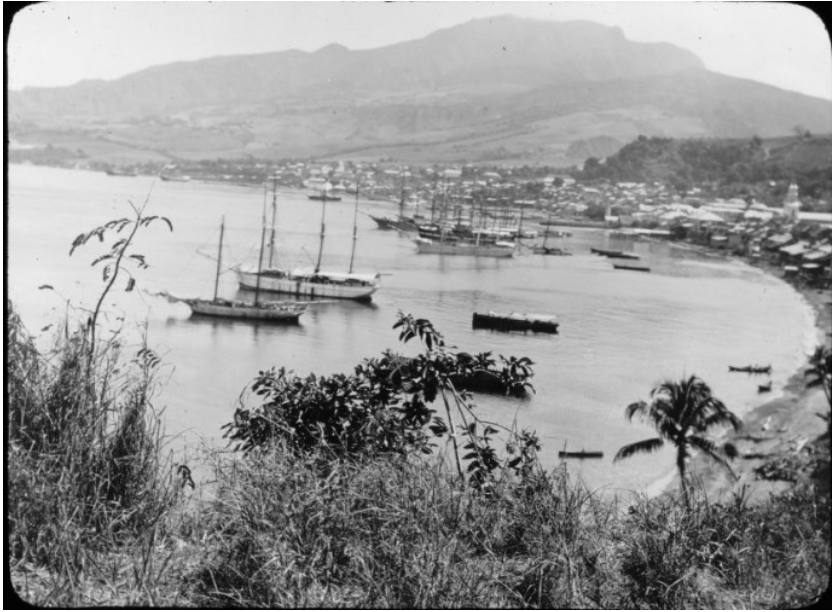
Figure 4.1: André Salles, *St Pierre, vu de la route du Carbet*, 1899. Source: Bibliothèque
nationale de France.
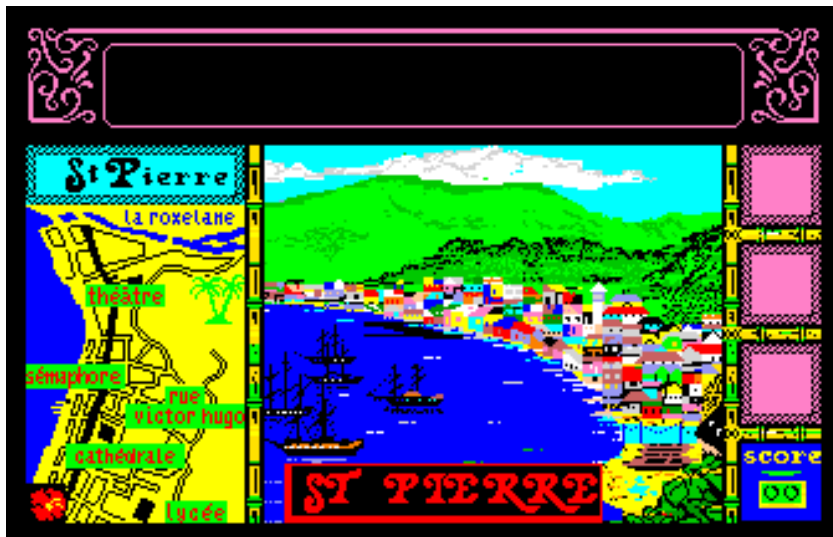


Figure 4.2: Screenshot from *Méwilo* (Coktel Vision, 1987), depicting the carefully reconstructed
city of Saint-Pierre in 1902.

cultural event at its release. Notably, however, only Tramis (as a designer) received the Silver Medal of the City of Paris on November 18, 1987; Roland Oskian accompanied her. Ten days later, in the Paris Fédération Nationale d'Achats des Cadres (FNAC) forum, Coktel Vision held a French-German competition. After a formal presentation of *Méwilo*, the participants competed to see who could finish the game the fastest with the best possible score. The event went well, and the positive reception of Tramis's debut work from the players proved the potential inherent in *Méwilo*.[51] The press also responded favorably to *Méwilo*. For example, *Génération 4* praised the pioneering theme and "well-crafted intrigue."[52] At the same time, Éric Caberia from *Tilt* argued that *Méwilo* "undoubtedly establishes a mini-revolution" regarding the previous portrayals of Afro-Caribbean culture in digital games.[53]

*Méwilo*—I must say it right away—is primarily a game driven by textual content rather than graphical perfection or immersive gameplay. This factor likely led to *Méwilo* not finding resonance outside of France and Germany. Although several versions of the game survived (for Amstrad CPC, Atari ST, Amiga, and Thomson computers) [M3], not all of them worked properly. One blogger notes that the French language Atari edition contained a critical bug. For example, if players failed to click on a single black dot on the image of the book, the program crashed [M2].[54]

Moreover, in *Méwilo*, the possibilities to create a narrative are minimal. One can only achieve the highest score in the game when following the path strictly set by the creators [N4]. Nevertheless, Tramis and Chamoiseau's game is a unique example of a work that had no original predecessor at its creation. The only thematically similar work is Martinican director Euzhan Palcy's film *Rue cases nègres*,[55] set in the parallel realities of Martinique in the 1930s. From Palcy's film, Tramis primarily borrowed the scene of a rattlesnake devoured by a mangrove. This scene served as a source of inspiration for one of the puzzles. A rattlesnake under the highest peak of Martinique, called Montagne Pélée, attacks the avatar if the player does not have mangrove capable of defeating the snake [M5].

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[51] Bernd Zimmermann and Michael Suck, "Ein Cocktail, der es in sich hat!" *Aktueller Software Markt*, no. 1 (January 1988): 55–57.

[52] Stéphane Lavoisard, Betty Franchi, and Didier Latil, "La Monde de l'aventure : Méwilo," *Génération 4*, no. 3 (1988): 111.

[53] Éric Caberia, "Rolling Softs : Méwilo," *Tilt*, no. 58 (1988): 54.

[54] Oli Kun, "Soluce rétrocompatible: Méwilo (Atari ST, Amiga, Amstrad)" (Jeux vidéo et des bas, February 12, 2015), https://archive.ph/tVb9i.

[55] Euzhan Palcy, *Rue Cases Nègres*, DVD (NEF Diffusion, 1983; France: Carlotta Films, 2010).

The game's ludic aspect is also awkward from today's perspective. The player, seeing the game world from the first-person perspective [N2], impersonates a parapsychologist who arrives in Martinique in 1902, having been invited by a wealthy white French couple, the Hubert-Destouches [N1, N3]. These owners of the Grande Parnasse villa, located on the outskirts of Saint-Pierre, ask the parapsychologist to investigate the causes of strange events inside the residence: objects moving out of place, sobs, and shattering screams coming from the bedroom [N1]. To unravel the mystery, the player has to read the confessions of the island's other residents who may know the reasons behind these paranormal phenomena. At the same time, "reading" the game must be careful. One must note information fleetingly mentioned by individual characters to type the person's name mentioned during previous conversations at the right moment [S4]. Failure to do so is punished by losing and turning the avatar into a bat [L4]. Moreover, game mechanics make the player stuck in some places. For example, to progress in the game by obtaining a bottle of rum, one needs to solve the quiz on Martinique's realities (e.g., how many times the island was taken over by the British), which requires non-diegetic knowledge outside the game world, not provided by the game itself [L1, L2, N4].

However, much more than as ludic software, *Méwilo* works from a literary perspective, which may have been influenced more by Chamoiseau than Tramis. During the investigation, the player faces various NPCs' highly different opinions and viewpoints [N3]. Both white and Black inhabitants of the island defend their perspectives on the events years ago. The player learns that the villa Grande Parnasse once belonged to a certain Arnaud de Ronan. His descendant, Valéry, is a renowned lawyer who describes his grandfather as a "noble" man. When Valéry talks, a Black washerwoman named Séraphine, whom Valéry depicts as a "true beauty," can be seen passing through the window. From other accounts, however, the prospect of white Frenchmen is suspect. Meanwhile, Séraphine relays during the play that Valéry continually sexually assaults her. From the Black Papa Échevin, full of contempt for white people ("You should hate those dogs"), one learns a different interpretation of the events occurring at his breadwinners: "if I tell you that misfortune is sprouting in the belly of the mountain, doom is near, and the zombie of the big house is crying blood from his hands and is descended from their family [the Hubert-Destouches' family], what will you tell me?" [N3, S2] As it later turns out, the zombie plaguing the Hubert-Destouches is Arnaud de Ronan. Why has his soul met such a fate?

As the investigation progresses, one learns the truth about Arnaud's dark past. In 1831, as a sugar plantation owner, he conceived a child with the wife of the titular enslaved person. When

a slave uprising broke out in Martinique, Arnaud killed Méwilo and threw his body into a dug pit. At the bottom, he hid his valuables to deter potential looters. He was killed while fighting enslaved people, but his family managed to escape the wrath of the oppressed rebels. From Arnaud's rape of Méwilo's wife, Échevin was born [N4].

The plot of the slave murder itself is an anecdote heard by Tramis and Chamoiseau [S3]. However, *Méwilo* maintains a reportage-like, even part-documentary tone—as far as the communication medium allows. In addition, the developers give voice to representatives of different races, classes, and cultures, enhancing the anti-colonial tone of *Méwilo*. A specific example is Alcipe Condelle, a relatively wealthy Creole. He says: "They say: abolition, abolition! And what has changed? Still for *béké* I am a Negro and nobody else" [N3, S2]. In this case, *béké* is the Creole word for white; Alcipe says whites refuse to accept him, despite his efforts to conform to them. "Although he dressed as a white, was educated and tolerated in the upper classes, his 'blackness' ultimately won out."[56] As a result, Condelle falls prey to what Homi Bhabha calls the strategy of mimicry, that is, conformity to the white colonizer in terms of customs and clothing. However, it does not go beyond imitation: "to be Anglicized is emphatically not to be English."[57] Similarly, Gallicization does not entitle one to become French [S3].

Black catholic priest Ésegippe, encountered at the cathedral in Saint-Pierre, represents a more caricatured variant of mimicry. Forgetting his African roots, Ésegippe is hostile to other Blacks who profess a different religion [N3]. Zygmunt Bauman ironically commented on the attitude many Martinicans adopted: "The more they do to turn into something else than they are, the more they are what they have been called not to be."[58]

In *Méwilo*, the nuanced critique of colonialism is underscored by narrative polyphony and Aesopian language. *Méwilo* appears, above all, as a game about the ongoing stigma of colonialism. Although the game is set in 1902—54 years after the abolition—according to the creators' suggestions, racial discrimination in Martinique has not ended. Moreover, if we translate the above considerations to 1987 (contemporary to the creators), Tramis and Chamoiseau's game is, in fact, about the present day. Martinique is formally still a part of France, not an independent state. The game ends with a volcanic explosion of Montagne Pélée in 1902, which claimed nearly 28 thousand lives [N1]. However, the independence movement in Martinique did not have the opportunity to erupt with momentum on par with nature. Aimé Césaire described

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[56]  Marian Florian Gawrycki, "Ameryka Łacińska, postkolonializm, Polska. Wprowadzenie," in *Strategie mimikry. Ameryka Łacińska (i nie tylko) w ujęciu postkolonialnym*, ed. Marian Florian Gawrycki (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2012), 10.

[57]  Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 89.

[58]  Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents* (Cambridge and London: Polity Press, 1997), 75.

such an inability to revolt: "At the end of the small hours, the forgotten Heights which have forgotten how to jump."[59] Thus, the revolution did not happen. Nevertheless, Chamoiseau, as the game scriptwriter, preferred preserving his ancestors' crumbling world to fighting with the new colonial order [S3, S4].

In conclusion, *Méwilo* preserves ancient Creole beliefs and culture. [S4]. For example, the different locations in the game—the port, Victor Hugo's street, or Saint-Pierre Cathedral—were digitized by the talented illustrator Philippe Truca, based on black and white postcards from before the disaster [S1, M5] (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2). Foremost, *Méwilo* is an elegy to a small homeland, badly damaged during a volcanic eruption. However, in this game, the text rather than the image builds the dramatic tension. Chamoiseau's screenwriting dominates here over the still untrained design for which Tramis was responsible. The proportions will be reversed in the next postcolonial game, *Freedom*.

### 4.2.4  *Freedom* (1988)



Figure 4.3: Screenshot from *Freedom* (Coktel Vision, 1988), depicting the board-like view of the plantation.

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59    Aimé Césaire, *Return to My Native Land*, trans. John Berger and Anna Bostock (1956; repr., Brooklyn: Archipelago Books, 2013), 12.

While *Méwilo* was primarily intended for the French and German markets, Coktel Vision translated the second game created by Tramis and Chamoiseau into English. It was initially named *Kilombo*, which meant "war camp" in the Kimbundu language.[60] Finally, however, it was limited to the English-language name *Freedom* for international distribution.

Upon its premiere in France in 1988, reviewers met *Freedom* with considerable acclaim. For example, Stéphane Lavoisard praised *Freedom* as a game "completely original from the point of view of the scenario." Additionally, Lavoisard applauded "Coktel and Muriel Tramis, who signed off with the excellent *Freedom*."[61] Already here, the conscious acknowledgment of the game's principal author is notable. However, Éric Caberia's review was far more resounding, referring to Tramis and Chamoiseau's second work as "the *Little Big Man* among video games."[62] Caberia was alluding to Arthur Penn's film,[63] whose viewers had the opportunity to experience the atrocities committed by U.S. cavalrymen against a peaceful Cheyenne people on screen. What sets *Freedom* apart from Penn's parodist film is its serious treatment of the subject of slavery in the Caribbean.

Thematically, *Freedom* was as pioneering a game as *Méwilo*—at least within the realm of game art. Several directors had already addressed the subject of plantation slavery in mainstream American films, but only from the white owners' point of view and only in relation to the American Civil War, as in *Gone with the Wind*,[64] *Slaves*,[65] or *Mandingo*.[66] The empowerment of enslaved Black people had primarily been provided by literature. The closest counterpart to *Freedom* was Maryse Condé's acclaimed novel *I, Tituba, Witch of Salem*.[67] The novel rewrites the history of a seventeenth-century Afro-Caribbean woman caught up in a witch trial in Massachusetts' North American English colony. Condé added an epilogue about a slave revolt on the island of Barbados. As Tramis claimed in an interview with Tristan Donovan: "The official recognition of slavery as a crime against humanity has changed the modern world, people are aware now. I could talk through the game at a time when the subject was still painful. It was my duty to remember."[68] The slave uprising against the sugar plantation owners is the

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[60]   Denis Schérer and Dany Boolauck, "Les secrets de l'animation," *Tilt*, no. 55 (1988): 75.

[61]   Stéphane Lavoisard and Jean Delaite, "La monde de l'aventure : Freedom," *Génération 4*, no. 6 (1988): 78.

[62]   Éric Caberia, "Freedom," *Tilt*, no. 61 (1989): 130.

[63]   Arthur Penn, *Little Big Man*, DVD (1970; repr., United States: Paramount Pictures, 2004).

[64]   Victor Fleming, *Gone with the Wind*, Blu-ray (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1938; United States: Warner Home Video, 2010).

[65]   Herbert J. Biberman, *Slaves*, DVD (United States: Slaves Company, 1969).

[66]   Richard Fleischer, *Mandingo*, Blu-ray (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1975; United States: StudioCanal, 2018).

[67]   Maryse Condé, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, trans. Richard Philcox (1986; repr., Vancouver: Langara College, 2016).

[68]   Cf. Tristan Donovan, *Replay: The History of Video Games* (Lewes: Yellow Ant, 2010), 127–28.

game's overarching theme [S3].  Although *Freedom* was released for multiple platforms—Amstrad, Atari, Amiga, and DOS machines—there was little difference in the visuals displayed [M1, M3].  The game began with a meaningful animation on all platforms in which a naked, shackled, enslaved person finds the strength to break his chains. Accompanying this animation is rhythmic drum music by François Peirano [S5].

The plot of *Freedom* is theoretically universal in time and space, as the creators do not specify where the game's events occur.  Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall argues that Tramis and Chamoiseau had the Haitian Revolution, the first successful attempt by enslaved Africans to break out for independence, in mind when designing the game. This reference would be evidenced by the ability to choose among the virtual leaders the famous freedom fighter François Mackandal, who was burned alive for his insurrectionary activities in 1758 by sentence of the French colonial authorities.[69]  However, from the presence of characters such as Arnaud de Ronan, mentioned in *Méwilo*, one can infer that the game's theme was the slave revolt in Martinique in 1831 [N1].  It was not an invention of Tramis or Chamoiseau. On February 9, 1831, about 300 enslaved people raided eleven plantations within Saint-Pierre. They tried to take control of the most important administrative center on the island. However, Frenchmen crushed the uprising almost as quickly as it broke out. An infantry regiment of white and Creole soldiers entered the town and repressed 260 revolters [S3].[70]  The player's task is to reconstruct the rebellion and turn it to the advantage of the freedom fighters [L1].

Compared to *Méwilo*, in which Chamoiseau's script played the most crucial role in the gameplay experience, Tramis's design skills are revealed in *Freedom*.  The ludic layer plays a significant role in *Freedom*. The game's goal is less about producing a specific narrative and more about engaging the player [L1]. The gameplay in *Freedom* begins by choosing a difficulty level (one of three) and the leader of a slave uprising against a sugar plantation owner. There are four heroes available (two males and two females). The differences between the heroes are the different allocation of skills. Males have higher strength skills, while females have higher cunning and charisma skills[71]. Depending on the level of difficulty and the chosen hero, the

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69    Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, *Slave Revolt on Screen. The Haitian Revolution in Film and Video Games* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021), 218–19.

70    Rebecca Hartkopf Schloss, *Sweet Liberty: The Final Days of Slavery in Martinique* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 135.

71    This division of skills, while seemingly stereotypical, actually reflects reality. Bernard Moitt, a researcher of colonialism in the French Antilles, emphasizes females' above-average courage when describing their participation in the armed struggle against French colonialism. Females participating in the uprisings in Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Haiti supplied ammunition, sang songs to motivate the slave troops, and showed determination equal to or sometimes greater than that of males. For this reason, they were subject to

opponents to face (the plantation owner and his subordinates) and potential allies within the enslaved Caribbean *community*: sorcerers (*quimboisiers*) and shamans (séanciers), are drawn at random [L1, L2]. The placement of specific NPCs is fixed, as in board games. The top half of the plantation's map is occupied by the owner and managers, while huts inhabited by enslaved people, where the player starts the action, constitute the bottom half [L3] (see Figure 4.3).

Controlling the minor character of the slave leader with the keyboard, it is usually necessary to search the huts inhabited by enslaved people so that at least some inhabitants participate in the revolt. The first difficulties arise because some enslaved people are reluctant to participate in the uprising out of fear for their lives. Furthermore, the spiritual leaders of the Caribbean community—sorcerers and shamans—initially refuse to participate in the revolt. Without their support, it is impossible to involve all the black inhabitants of the plantation [L2]. Therefore, the player must confront individual opponents to recruit a larger number of rebels necessary for the revolt's success. The player needs to sneak into the opponents' headquarters and avoid dog patrols that may alert the plantation owner [L2]. The confrontation with the opponents is based on a symbolic duel between two Black warriors. As in arcade fighting games, one must damage the symbolic opponent using various attacks and dodges [L2].

Defeated plantation stewards can be imprisoned or killed, and the choice significantly affects the rebels' morale [L2]. If the player chooses to keep the captives alive but fails to provide adequate guard, the prisoners may escape and alert the rest of the plantation stewards. However, *Freedom* strongly discourages inflicting violence on the colonists (for example, setting fire to buildings or murdering those the player defeats). Every murder of a defeated subordinate of a plantation owner reduces the insurgents' morale. When it reaches zero, the game is interrupted by a militia favorable to the plantation owner, which disperses the insurgents [L2, S4].

Depending on random factors, a game sequence can be triggered during which a pack of dogs attacks the revolt leader [L2]. The perspective changes drastically. With a first-person view and a weapon (if the player has acquired one), the player must defend themselves against the two-dimensional animated dog textures [L3, N2, S1]. If unsuccessful, dogs bite the uprising leader's avatar (accompanied by a symbolic decrease in the number of rebellious enslaved people) or tear them apart, ending the game [L2]. The screen is then flooded with blood, clearly illustrating the violence French colonists committed against enslaved people in the past. However, if the player defeats all the plantation owner's direct subordinates, they can attack the

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sentences as restrictive as those imposed on enslaved males. Hence, paying homage to the revolt of 1831 also meant showing respect for the female victims of colonial violence (Bernard Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635-1848* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 127–33).

headquarters. In that case, an animation appears in which an Afro-Caribbean enslaved person shoots their opponent with a gun, who falls to the ground covered in blood [L4, S1].

*Freedom* can be considered a gamic *Gesamtkunstwerk*; Tramis and Chamoiseau's piece mixes strategy, arcade, and adventure game mechanics. Admittedly, with each successive session, it becomes clear that the avatar's paths are limited due to the need to evade pursuit dogs [L3]. Still, *Freedom* is much more accessible to casual players than *Méwilo* and more clearly depicts the drastic nature of the struggle between enslavers and enslaved people. *Méwilo* was primarily Chamoiseau's masterpiece and a promising premise for his international literary career;[72] meanwhile, *Freedom* is Tramis's masterpiece, closer to the conventions typical of digital games. Nevertheless, both games undoubtedly foreshadowed the breakthrough of postcolonial discourse into social consciousness. Tramis tried to develop postcolonial criticism again, without Chamoiseau, in *Lost in Time*.

### 4.2.5  *Lost in Time* (1993)

*Lost in Time* was developed in 1993 when Coktel Vision was under the publishing supervision of the American company Sierra On-Line. Tramis designed the game and wrote the screenplay for it with Corinne Carrère. Oskian supervised the project's production, while Philippe Lamarque played a significant role in the programming process. Video sequences and 3D camera rides, developed by Frédéric Chauvelot and Pascal Legrand, were essential to the game.

In France, *Lost in Time* eceived positive reviews. Tramis's game was seen as another step in the designer's reckoning with slavery. Christian Roux of *Génération 4* claimed that Tramis "allowed us to rediscover the Caribbean, surprising us with numerous details of educational value."[73] More often, however, the form of *Lost in Time* drew praise. The game featured full-motion video sequences, pioneering at release (June 1993). This technique allowed animating the characters and scenes that opened in separate windows (for example, when the main character performed actions to move the game forward). Years later, however, *Lost in Time* was judged much less favorably, as evidenced by a review in *Jeux Vidéo Magazine*:

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[72]   In 1992, Chamoiseau completed the novel *Texaco*, awarded Goncourt Prize. *Texaco* arouses topics also present in *Méwilo*, like the slavery in Martinique and the catastrophe of Saint-Pierre in 1902. The latter is commented as such: "A tide of ash. A deposit of still heat. The stone's red glow. Intact beings stuck to wall corners, going up in strings of smoke. Some were shriveled up like dried grass dolls. Children savagely interrupted. Bodies undone, bones too clean, and oh how many eyes without looks". (Patrick Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, trans. Rose-Myriam Réjouis and Val Vinokurov (1992; repr., London: Granta, 2018), 150).

[73]   Christian Roux, "Lost in Time : Sur les traces de Mac Gyver," *Génération 4*, no. 56 (1993): 47.

Figure 4.4: Screenshot from *Lost in Time* (Coktel Vision, 1993), depicting the passage forbidden for females.

> You have to admit that the story does not make any sense. It is a narrative mess, a dump mixing time travel, slavery, and a futuristic thriller. It is a "freak show" with no arms or legs, barely developed without some thought towards cinematography. The game piles on aberrant plot twists with unrelenting seriousness, losing the refreshingly naughty humor that gave *Fascination* its palatability.[74]

One can partly attribute this judgment to the visuals of *Lost in Time*. The game's strength—the full-motion video inserts—now seems anachronistic compared to its release. Moreover, dialogue character animations are looped to a few frames [M2, S1, S5]. The CD-ROM version of the game also included recorded English dialogues, which have a level of amateurishness typical of "interactive films" from the 1990s. However, in screenwriting, where Tramis had the most significant control, *Lost in Time* can be defended as campy.

In her 1964 classic *Notes on Camp*, Susan Sontag defines her subject of consideration as "decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content."[75] However, Sontag also distinguishes between the so-called conscious camp, characterized by

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[74]  Mallory Delicourt, "Test du jeu Lost in Time sur PC" (Jeuxvideo.com, March 16, 2010), https://www.jeuxvi deo.com/articles/0001/00012553-lost-in-time-test.htm.

[75]  Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays*, by Susan Sontag (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), 278.

pushy and calculating derision, and the pure, naive camp. This one relies on the superiority of style over content and the deadly seriousness of the author. Yet, the viewer experiences pleasure through the mix of "the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naive."[76] Thus, can the "narrative messiness" and "unrelenting seriousness" of *Lost in Time* be judged negatively? [S3]

On a gameplay level, *Lost in Time* is the most imaginative of the postcolonial games created by Tramis. The game's mechanics involve collecting, using, and combining items to solve elaborate logic puzzles [L2]. For example, throughout the second chapter of *Lost in Time*,[77] the main challenge is gathering the items required to fire up the stove and heat the mansion's interior. Heating requires wood, a match, and additional flammable material. However, one can find the nearest wood in a shipwreck near the island. On the other hand, the match can be found in a bottle with a miniature ship. Finally, the flammable material turns out to be a handkerchief found in a fisherman's cottage, which needs to be soaked with gasoline obtained from a tractor at the entrance gate to the mansion. Occasionally, the puzzles are procedurally generated, meaning they change with each new approach in the game. For example, looking through a virtual telescope at the wreck of a ship, the player can read the symbols of a cannonball, a saber, and a cannon, arranged in a random order. These symbols come in handy when opening a chest found in the crypt. Based on the cipher on the shipwreck, the chest lock must be unlocked using the respective symbols of a knife, a gun, and a bullet [L2].

The plot of *Lost in Time* begins with a spectacular screen blur that simulates the main character Doralice waking up. Doralice finds herself in 1840 on a ship sailing from the island of San Cristóbal. Doralice's initial goal is to free herself and two other bound "passengers" of the boat [N1]. The first, Yoruba, is the son of a mighty man "from a family of Egyptian sorcerers."[78] The second, Melkior, is a white timekeeper who intended to neutralize the ship's owner, a smuggler called Jarlath de la Prunelière. After being forcibly enslaved and separated from Jarlath's white wife, Velvet (with whom he had an affair), Yoruba plans to commit suicide [N3]. Luckily, the player-controlled main character dissuades him from this intention by taking the knife from him and promising him freedom [L2]. Otherwise, the so-called grandfather paradox would happen.

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[76]    Ibid., 283.
[77]    The game consists of three chapters inside the ship, on the estate, and San Cristóbal Island.
[78]    Tramis was likely referring to the Nubians of southern Egypt. However, the Yoruba name refers to the African Yoruba people living in West Africa.

*Lost in Time* refers to the temponautic (i.e., concerning time travel) topos characteristic of science fiction [M5]. In the game's second chapter, a playable flashback, the player learns the circumstances of Doralice's strange fate. Arriving at her new property on the shores of Brittany (a province in northwest France), Doralice burns wood on a stove. However, a secret space opens up, leading to another space-time continuum. When Doralice opens a sarcophagus abandoned in the dark, she meets Jarlath. He takes Doralice by force, stuns and enslaves her, and attempts to cause the death of Yoruba and his illegitimate son Maximin (a child of an impure race and ancestor of Doralice). Furthermore, Jarlath wants to annihilate Doralice to preserve his French estate and cover his smuggling activities [N1]. The problem is that this "assassination tourism" must turn against the traveler.[79]

American writer and engineer Paul J. Nahin argued that the mistake many science fiction novels make is taking the possibility of changing the past through time travel for granted. Meanwhile, Nahin argues that a time traveler cannot change the past because a slight change in history would cause drastic changes in the present, resulting in the traveler's death. The past can only be influenced: "You cannot prevent either the Black Death in the London of 1665 or the Great Fire the following year, but it *is* logically possible that you—a careless time traveler—could be the cause of either events or perhaps of both."[80] Tramis touches on this theme of the grandfather paradox by putting words in the characters' mouths that anticipate the further course of the game's action [S2]:

> **Melkior**: I know what's going on: when Jarlath met you, he moved to the past…
> And when you followed before, you crossed into another dimension! […]
>
> **Doralice**: So, since I inherited this property, Jarlath, as the owner, is dead […].
>
> **Melkior**: That could mean that in your reality, you'll kill him…
>
> **Doralice**: A bit complicated, that theory of yours! I haven't killed him yet… Or maybe I've already killed him…

This peculiar dialogue concerns a problem discussed in many science fiction novels and stories. However, the plot's resolution of *Lost in Time* is quite campy. When Doralice, Melkior, and Yoruba escape from the ship and teleport to the island of Saint Cristóbal, Yoruba reunites with Velvet. Meanwhile, the main character confronts Jarlath on a bridge over an abyss [N4].

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79  The term "assassination tourism" is cited after Mariusz Leś, see (Mariusz M. Leś, *Fantastycznonaukowe podróże w czasie. Między logiką a emocjami* (Białystok: Temida 2, 2018), 119).
80  Paul J. Nahin, *Time Travel* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1997), 270.

The powerful solution to the puzzle turns out to be semiotically ambiguous. Since the player learns earlier in the game that Jarlath is allergic to flowers [L2], Doralice can disable the antagonist by giving him an orchid [L2]. Jarlath, having puffed twice, falls into an abyss, as shown in an awkward animation [N1, S5]. The initial reaction to this ending might be laughter and disbelief. However, historian and biologist Jim Endersby points out that the orchid connoted seductive femaleness in "Western" countries.[81] The ancient Greek philosopher, Theophrastus of Eresos, argued that orchids possessed a mutually contradictory property: inducing erection or sterility [S3]. This judgment was repeated in later ancient and modern literature.[82] In Raymond Chandler's *Big Sleep*, one finds General Sternwood's scornful opinion that the scent of orchids "has the rotten sweetness of a prostitute."[83] Thus, the seductive gesture of handing an orchid to a man like Jarlath ridicules him and undermines his masculinity, leading to his symbolic death.

Jarlath, however, is not the only misogynist in the game. On the island of Saint Cristobal, one can meet Makandal, a black slave broker. Driven by opportunism, Makandal allies with Jarlath against females. Next to the passage to Makandal's hut, hollowed out beneath the mountain [L3], is an inscription telling females "to get out. Could it be that Makandal is a misogynist?" comments the heroine [S2] (see Figure 4.4). Makandal's character in the game thus undermines the "White/Black" dialectic. *Lost in Time* reminds us that dark-skinned females experienced "sexual exploitation from inside and outside of their families and from the rape and threat of rape by white as well as Black males."[84] Symbolic violence by men in *Lost in Time* is racially universal.[85]

*Lost in Time* was created without the help of Chamoiseau, but this game brings the postcolonial trilogy to a close. Moreover, *Lost in Time* creatively recycles themes in Chamoiseau's creative work. The emphasis on Caribbean folklore and the ambiguity of colonial relations between white Frenchmen and distant descendants of Africans are undoubtedly apparent in the games

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81  Jim Endersby, *Orchid: A Cultural History* (Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 162.

82  "There is at least one plant whose root is said to show both powers. This is the so-called salep [*Orchis spp.*, e.g., *O. mascula*], which has a double bulb, one large and one small. The larger, given in the milk of a mountain goat, produces more vigour in sexual intercourse; the smaller inhibits and forestalls" (cf. Andrew Dalby, "The Name of the Rose Again; or, What Happened to Theophrastus on Aphrodisiacs," *Petit Propos Culinaires* 64, no. 2 (2000): 11–13, https://bit.ly/45iVdj1).

83  Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (1939; repr., New York: Ballantine Books, 1971), 7.

84  Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 914, https://doi.org/10.1086/494552.

85  David D. Gilmore demonstrated in his study of misogyny that dislike of females is universal regardless of culture. Misogyny characterizes Judeo-Christian and Islamic, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist societies; it is even present in Melanesian communities (see David D Gilmore, *Misogyny: The Male Malady* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), passim).

developed by Tramis. However, it should be noted that Tramis critiqued masculinity before *Lost in Time* in a trilogy of games I call the Erotic Trilogy. It comprises three titles released under the Tomahawk banner: *Emmanuelle*, *Geisha*, and *Fascination*.

Now, let us go back to 1989 when the Erotic Trilogy began.

### 4.2.6 *Emmanuelle* (1989)



Figure 4.5: Screenshot from *Emmanuelle* (Coktel Vision, 1989), where the players choose the dialogue lines to attract a woman's attention.

After the favorable reception of two postcolonial games, *Méwilo* and *Freedom*, the release of an erotic game signed by Tramis surprised critics. Then, some gaming magazines launched a fierce attack on the designer. One example is François Coulon's column in *Joystick Hebdo*, which argued as follows:

> The decision to create "naughty" software condemns one to gradually cross the wire that separates unsavory childishness from swaggering porn… Despite its commitment to dialogue and restraint, the location of *Emmanuelle* oscillates at times between pinkish soft [porn] and a kind of triviality… The box with *Emmanuelle* is signed only with the scientific and sexless "M. Tramis." Muriel doesn't give a damn and prefers to impose her style only to hide her name from no one she knows…[86]

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[86]    François Coulon, "Le grand zoo : Muriel Tramis," *Tilt*, no. 7 (1988): 26.

The problem is that Coulon, who would become the author of probably the first French illustrated hypertext, *L'Égérie*,[87] used the initials "F. C." himself. Thus, the above argumentation is hypocritical.[88] Admittedly, there were also positive reviews of *Emmanuelle* in France, such as the one in *Tilt*:

> *Emmanuelle* is a program that successfully adapts the first volume of the Emmanuelle Arsan erotic series frivolously, without simultaneously falling into vulgarity.[89]

Perhaps the drastic differences separating the two opinions result from a different understanding of the *politique d'auteurs*. *Emmanuelle* was a pivotal moment of producer emancipation for Tramis. Since 1988, the designer of *Freedom* had the Tomahawk studio at her disposal, which was still formally under Coktel Vision, but could produce games with a non-educational profile. During the development of *Emmanuelle*, Tramis wrote the screenplay with Coktel Vision's transient employee Alain Bessard but is also listed in the opening credits as the person responsible for directing (*réalisation*). *Méwilo*'s designer could thus pursue the "politique d'auteurs," or as Coulon says, "impose her style."

The literary original of *Emmanuelle* was the 1959 novel by Emmanuelle Arsan.[90] The novel, which spawned a blockbuster movie,[91] pushed the acceptable boundaries of mainstream literary and artistic creation. The reader or viewer of *Emmanuelle* may witness literal scenes of sex, masturbation, or rape, which the heroine nonetheless experiences with relish [M5, S3]. While seemingly having liberating potential, *Emmanuelle* was merely an infamous precursor to *Fifty Shades of Grey*.[92] Furthermore, although Arsan's novel was written from a female perspective, it did not lend itself to feminism. British feminist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown emphasized how toxic Arsan and other female authors' relationship with pornography was:

> The porn business would have died long ago without female participation. When we railed against the industry in the Sixties and Seventies, we never addressed

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87    François Coulon and Laurent Cotton, *L'Égerie*, version Atari ST (France: Logiciels d'en Face, 1990).

88    Besides, In *L'Égerie*, an otherwise pioneering hypertext, Coulon mischievously included an Afro-Caribbean lesbian non-player character Gabrielle (a clear reference to Muriel Tramis), whom the central character Amandine might encounter.

89    Dany Boulauck, Jacques Harbonn, and Olivier Hautefeuille, "Aventure : Emmanuelle," *Tilt*, no. 72 (1989): 5.

90    See the English translation: Emmanuelle Arsan, *Emmanuelle*, trans. Lowell Blair (New York: Grove Press, 1978).

91    Just Jaeckin, *Emmanuelle*, version DVD (France: StudioCanal, 1974).

92    E. L. James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012).

these inconvenient truths. Now that the pornification of society is so pervasive and deep, we have to deal with the many ways in which women support the evil, rather than fighting it.[93]

Bringing the universe established by Arsan to computer screens carried similar risks. When Tramis developed the *Emmanuelle* adaptation, strip poker simulators such as *Teenage Queen*[94] were highly popular.[95] However, *Emmanuelle* was neither a literal adaptation of a specific literary or film work nor did it benefit from the success of other erotic games. Instead, the game closely resembled the film *Emmanuelle IV*.[96] Its main character, Sylvia, flees from her lover to Brazil and assumes a new, eponymous identity [N1]. The game's objective is to search for Emmanuelle in various locations in South America [L1].

Screenshot from *Emmanuelle* (Coktel Vision, 1989), where the players choose the dialogue lines to attract a woman's attention.: Examples of dialogues and answers by female interlocutors in *Emmanuelle*, translation from French: own work.

Still, to achieve this goal, the player must collect three *putti* figures and keep two indicators high enough: energy and "eroticism." Their visualizations are—respectively—a glass with punch and lipstick (which takes a phallic shape) [S1]. However, energy is lost due to love conquests and possible fights with competitors [L2]. Since energy loss results in the avatar's automatic death, energy should be used as little as possible [S4]. On the other hand, the "eroticism" rating changes depending on whether the avatar meets the three conditions [L1]:

- will maintain contact with a diverse number of partners,

- will not see the face of at least one of his partners,

- will enter into an erotic contract with one partner at least twice.

By raising the "eroticism" rating to at least 75%, the player gains information about Emmanuelle's whereabouts [L2]. The woman moves between various locations in South America (Iguaca, Manaus, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador) [N3]. To reach Emmanuelle, the player must master the art of seducing other females passing through the game world. Before sexual intercourse,

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[93]   Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, "Women Are Complicit in Misogyny," *The Independent*, October 14, 2013, https://bit.ly/3BILnZh.

[94]   Éric Doireau, *Teenage Queen*, version Amiga (France: Ére Informatique, 1988).

[95]   See an exemplary enthusiastic review of *Teenage Queen* (Stéphane Lavoisard, Didier Latil, and Frank Ladoire, "Teenage Queen," *Génération 4*, 1988, 15).

[96]   Francis Leroi and Iris Letans, *Emmanuelle IV*, DVD (Cannon Films, 1984; France: StudioCanal, 2015).

Table 4.1: Screenshot from *Emmanuelle* (Coktel Vision, 1989), where the players choose the dialogue lines to attract a woman's attention.

| Dialogue tree | Answer |
|---|---|
| 1a. A woman of your class is made for happiness. I will offer it to you! [Une femme de votre est faite pour le bonheur. Je vous l'offre!] | We're a lot alike! I agree! [Nous nous ressemblons! J'accepte!] |
| 1b. I would love to meet your own Brazil! [J'aimerais connaître votre Brésil à vous!] | I have my Brazil, you just have to come pick it up... [Mon Brésil est en moi, il vous faudra venir le chercher...] |
| 1c. Baby, let's drink one each! [Bébé, si on allait en tirer un!] | Hey, I'm not your girlfriend yet! [Hey! Je ne suis pas encore votre petite amie!] |
| 2a. What if we played with your little thread ball! [Et si on se faisait une petite pelote!] | I'm not interested in your proposal! Take your purr somewhere else! [Vos propos ne m'intéressent pas! Allez ronronner ailleurs!] |
| 2b. I want to submit to all your vices and whims! [Je veux me soumettre à tous vos vices et caprices!] | You can't sit at the bar for a minute because you're being accosted by some pompous macho! [On ne peut pas être tranquille à ce bar une minute, sans qu'un macho imbu de sa personne vous importune!] |
| 2c. Your lovely jewels subtly enhance your beauty. Are they from here? [Votre beauté est subtilement mise en valeur par ces ravissants bijoux. Sont-ils d'ici?] | Yes, they are entirely locally produced. But I would love to see yours... [Oui, c'est une production tout à fait locale. Mais j'aimerais bien voir les vôtres...] |

a dialogue must take place. Conversations must be chosen from the options scrolling on the screen to match the females' programmed personality [L1, L2]. The player receives different answers depending on the selected text (Table 4.1).

Based on the above exchange of dialogue options with one of the interlocutors [N4], one can conclude that she appreciates more subtle forms of flirting. Moreover, the choice of primitive sentences, like addressing the interlocutor as "baby" or inviting her to play with a "little ball",[97] discourages her from further conversation [S4]. Admittedly, in some locations, one can encounter "women-objects," exposing their breasts and measuring the player with flirtatious eyes. However, talking to these females is pointless [N3, L2]. Instead, they accept even the most insulting dialogue with appreciation, which quickly ends in a sex scene. However, nothing good comes out of sexual intercourse with "women-objects". The "eroticism" and energy ratings plummet, and none of the conditions for completing the game are met [L2, S4]. Therefore, Tramis encourages empathy in *Emmanuelle* when conversing with women-subjects who are not sexual phantasms but persons with dignity [S4]. The most significant erotic charge is hidden in the dialogue with a female. That is why *Emmanuelle* is a warning against a situation where, to use Germaine Greer's words, "We make love to organs and not people."[98]

### 4.2.7 *Geisha* (1990)

While *Emmanuelle* already stirred controversy, *Geisha*, also designed by Tramis, was even more provocative. While the rest of the team members were exclusively male,[99] Tramis could call herself an *autrice* in the title credits (she used the neologism "authoress" in the English game version).

However, *Geisha* divided critics even more than *Emmanuelle*. For example, a positive review by Cyrille Baron from *Joystick* magazine stated: "Here is a tailor-made, less vulgar than the usual porn film, but much lustier, the first real erotic game."[100] In contrast, Jean-Loup Jovanovic from *Tilt* described Tramis's next production as "a juvenile game for adults."[101] British journalist Richard Cobbett, from his contemporary perspective, driven by intellectual

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[97]    The original word *pelote* in French means not only a 'little ball' but also a 'pussy'.

[98]    Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (1970; repr., New York: Harper-Collins, 2002), 52.

[99]    Philippe Lamarque programmed the game; Pascal Pautrot, Thierry Perreau, and Pierre Gilhodes (later collaborating regularly with Tramis) developed the visuals. At the same time, Yannick Chosse incorporated digitized character animations into the game. Finally, Joseph Kluytmans created the introductory animation (intro) to the actual gameplay.

[100]   Cyrille Baron, "Geisha," *Joystick*, no. 11 (1990): 210.

[101]   Jean-Loup Jovanovic, "Geisha," *Tilt*, no. 87 (1991): 70.

Figure 4.6: Screenshot from *Geisha* (Coktel Vision, 1990), where the player undresses a mad scientist Napadami.

laziness, found *Geisha* impossible to finish.[102] As I will try to prove, Cobbett is wrong, though indeed, *Geisha* is an unpleasant piece of work to play. After failed attempts to solve a logic or arcade challenge, it requires frequent reloading.

*Geisha* begins with an animation that shows a mad Japanese scientist named Napadami[103] conducting experiments. The experiment involves fusing a female body and metal armor, resulting in a "gynoid," a female robot capable of "killing with pleasure" [L1]. Thus, one can interpret the game's beginning as a particular form of objectifying the female body. As the "experiment" ensues, the game shows—as if through a "keyhole"—a close-up of a terrified woman's eye [N2]. However, as it turns out, the matter is more complex.

The game begins in Paris [N1]. The player impersonates a French photographer whose girlfriend, Ève, has been kidnapped by Napadami [N3]. Initially, the player must photograph a model posing naked. However, the player must first look at a Japanese ideogram in the upper-left corner of the screen. This ideogram must be pointed out in one of the final puzzles [L2]. The successive stages of gameplay in *Geisha* consist of logic or arcade mini-games loosely connected to the main storyline about searching for Ève [L1]:

- pouring oil on a girl sunbathing topless;

- guessing a sequence of five numbers with a limited number of tries;

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102    Richard Cobbett, "Saturday Crapshoot: Geisha," *PC Gamer*, June 29, 2013, https://archive.is/u0ctr.
103    A play on words: in French, it reads like "n'a pas d'amie," meaning "he has no friend."

- playing a simple card game;

- controlling a naked woman and collecting pearls while avoiding sharks;

- playing strip poker with a model;

- steering a phallic ship and defeating viruses;

- and finally timed dragon puzzles.

These mini-games, when mentioned, may sound trivial. However, mastering them in *Geisha* often depends on luck. In my case, I often had to save the game because wildly guessing sequences of numbers or completing puzzles (with limited time) proved to be quite difficult. Undoubtedly, *Geisha* is not an enjoyable game, especially in terms of its alleged eroticism. Instead of enjoyment, the player often experiences frustration [S4]. Furthermore, the ultimate "reward" for completing the game—an image of a naked Creole girl who serves as the director's *porte parole*—is disproportionate to the effort made [S1]. However, should we dismiss *Geisha* for that reason? In my opinion, not necessarily because with the time spent playing the game, one can ultimately understand Tramis's message.

When it comes time for the final confrontation with Napadami, it turns out that his weakest point is his crotch. The player incapacitates the opponent by clicking on it and shatters the metal shell behind which the vagina is hidden [L2, S1]. Gradually "undressing" the scientist's exterior, one can uncover his true identity. Nap*adam*i is Ève (see Figure 4.6). Both names then take on a special meaning. The original biblical dogma about a woman created from a man's rib becomes reversed in the ending: Adam is merely a superstructure of Eve, an android created in her likeness. The phallogocentric world order (focused on the importance of male reason) becomes overturned. Thus, Tramis, in her game, rejects the Freudian psychoanalytic interpretation, according to which females were supposedly subject to symbolic castration[104] [S3].

Of course, someone might ask why a woman trapped in a male body was transforming other females into gynoids. The answer would be that until the player liberated Eve, she was ruled by a symbolic order described by Luce Irigaray as "hommosexuality" (*l'hommo-sexualité*).[105]

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[104]   Bertram J. Cohler and Robert M. Galatzer-Levy, "Freud, Anna, and the Problem of Female Sexuality," *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (January 3, 2008): 4–6, https://doi.org/10.1080/07351690701787085.

[105]   The term introduced in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, see Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 103.

Hommosexuality attributes the supposedly genderless and universal power of reason to males in power, to whom "emotional" females are subjected [S3]:

> woman will be involved in the process of specularizing the phallus, begged to maintain the desire for the same that man has… the mystery (hysteria?) that will always remain modestly behind every mirror, and that will spark the desire to see and know more about it.[106]

Therefore, the close-up mentioned above on the female eye in *Geisha* may be treated as Ève's glimpse.[107]  This hypothesis would be confirmed by the breathing of Ève—breathing through the male shell. So, the player deals with the gaze of a woman trapped in a male body. She is freed from this prison only by a player-controlled avatar.

### 4.2.8  *Fascination* (1991)



Figure 4.7: Screenshot from *Fascination* (Coktel Vision, 1991) that depicts a room filled with pornography.

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[106]   Ibid., 103.

[107]   Irigaray's concept of hommosexuality, although easily applicable to the example of *Geisha*, raised some concerns nonetheless. Teresa de Lauretis, from the lesbian perspective, stated that the term *hommo-sexualité* not only emphasizes the exclusion and inability of lesbian sexuality but also prohibits treating gay sexuality "as another kind of male sexuality, one not homologous or easily assimilable to the 'normal' " (Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 7).

The third part of the Erotic Trilogy, *Fascination*, was released in 1991 for the Atari ST, Amiga, and DOS computers [M3]. Tramis again took care of the design, while Philippe Lamarque, the programmer who had worked on *Geisha*, handled the programming. Chosse, Kluytmans, and another newcomer to Tomahawk, Rachid Chebli, created the illustrations. The DOS version included a full-motion video introduction absent from the Amiga and Atari editions. It depicted a French stewardess, Doralice, escorting a business person responsible for manufacturing sexual potency drugs in Miami. Soon, a sniper rifle shot kills the businessman, and Doralice, the only witness to the crime, must prove her innocence [N1, S5].

The introduction, summarized as such, may initially seem like the premise of a mediocre erotic film. Particularly in Anglo-Saxon magazines, *Fascination* was treated as low-quality pornography. Peter Lee from the British *Amiga Action* sneered that "there's not really anything here to get too excited about, apart from the short porn sequences, of course!… Pervert types among you are sure to buy it, regardless of quality."[108] Years later, in the UK version of *PC Gamer*, Cobbett mused that *Fascination* contained "perhaps the stupidest ending of any game in history."[109] Then he wondered, using an analogy, "what kind of film *The Game* would have been if Michael Douglas had been forced to insert a set of anal beads to hide a microfiche."[110]

However, what completely escapes these English-language reviews is why *Fascination* receives reviews in France. Reviewers universally praised the script for its "depth" [sic!], ease of use, and polished visuals upon its release. What is more, maybe the most insightful contemporary French review says:

> Pure Delight. The plot always makes us want to follow it. Since the puzzles aren't too challenging, we derive a lot of pleasure from constantly finding solutions to the puzzles (looking for a pin that's the width of a pixel, for example). The fact that you can sometimes lose the game by getting caught adds some spice to the whole thing… But [the game contains] lots of great ideas: interrogations where you have to choose your answers carefully; old-fashioned clues that you have to write down on a piece of paper; a slight allusion to police boorishness; a final twist; and finally, the first funny puzzle.[111]

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[108] Peter Lee, "Action-Test: Fascination," *Amiga Action*, no. 36 (1991): 30.
[109] Richard Cobbett, "Crapshoot: Fascination, One of the Most Confusing Erotic Thrillers Ever," *PC Gamer*, October 8, 2011, https://bit.ly/42SO6wd.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Oli Kun, "Fascination (PC, 1991)" (Jeux vidéo et des bas, April 15, 2011), https://archive.is/3ReIj.

To understand why the reception of *Fascination* in France and the United Kingdom is so different, I need to start with some facts. First, the release of *Fascination* coincided with the release of another erotic game, *Leisure Suit Larry 5*,[112] another installment in Al Lowe's series. Furthermore, the *Leisure Suit Larry* series was renowned for the erotic adventures of its balding protagonist and its homophobic tropes. In *Leisure Suit Larry III*,[113] Larry faces the danger of being caught by lesbian cannibals.

Meanwhile, Tramis aimed to deconstruct the male viewpoint on erotic matters while designing *Fascination*. The main character of *Fascination* is a female, the aforementioned Doralice, who will return in *Lost in Time* [N3]. The player reads the main character's thoughts and adopts her visual perspective [N2]. There are only a few situations where the player can see Doralice in conditions that make her an object of the gaze, such as when taking a shower or trying on clothes [N2]. However, to paraphrase Diane Carr, although Doralice's "physicality and gender invite objectification, yet she operates as perpetrating and penetrative subject within the narrative."[114]

By giving the player control over the female protagonist, Tramis also diversified the game's mechanics. Although *Fascination* relies on solving logic puzzles using found objects [L2], Doralice must choose dialogues at certain moments. When encountered men put the protagonist under pressure, the player must answer them evasively [N4]. One such conversation occurs between Doralice and Pedro di Holges, aka Peter Hillgate. This mad scientist wants to obtain the recipe for a potency drug to turn men into sexual beasts. Later, Doralice faces pressure from a gruff police officer who impersonates Kenneth Miller, the son of the drug's manufacturer. Wrong answers result in losing, which can be frustrating but shows the risks females usually face when talking to men [S4].

In the game's model walkthrough, Doralice embodies the model of the cinematic *femme fatale* who leads men to their doom. As for *Fascination*, however, this *femme fatale* does the right thing. Doralice frees Lou Dale, the woman kidnapped by Hillgate, and narcotizes the police officer with whom she had sex earlier (assuming a dominant cowgirl position). Furthermore, she does not let Hillgate overpower her but attacks him with chloroform. In this respect, *Fascination* is the opposite of games like *Leisure Suit Larry*, as it gives the female character back her agency [N1].

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[112]  Al Lowe, *Leisure Suit Larry 5: Passionate Patti Does a Little Undercover Work*, version Apple II (United States: Sierra On-Line, 1991).

[113]  Al Lowe, *Leisure Suit Larry III: Passionate Patti in Pursuit of the Pulsating Pectorals*, version Apple II (United States: Sierra On-Line, 1989).

[114]  Diane Carr, "Playing with Lara," in *Screenplay*, ed. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (London – New York: Wallflower Press, 2002), 173.

Of course, one would say that *Fascination* abounds in other erotic representations (posters, paintings) featuring naked objectified females [S1, L3]. It is impossible not to agree with this opinion. However, I would like to point out that the entire content of *Fascination* relies on the assumption that the culturally dominant male gender is responsible for these pornographic representations. The final playable scene of *Fascination* takes place in a prison. The heroine enters there, finding a secret passage in a living room full of pornographic pictures (see Figure 4.7) [L3]. Hence, it follows that pornography generally leads to the confinement of females in immanence [S4].

However, upon finding a way out of prison, the player realizes that Doralice has attended a rigged murder party. Cobbett tries to dismiss this ending as worse than in Fincher's *The Game*.[115] Nevertheless, let us remember that *The Game*, which also contained a murder party directed against an arrogant business person, had a similarly drastic plot development [M5]. Furthermore, *The Game* led to a similar ending—a birthday party for the surprised protagonist. Attacking Tramis is therefore undermining the content of Fincher's film as well.

What ties *Fascination* and *The Game* together is undoubtedly a critique of capitalism personified by the United States. However, Tramis in *Fascination* also examines the relationship between capitalism and pornography. British art historian Lynda Nead argues that pornography, despite its poor social reputation, is elevated to a pedestal by capitalist profit politics.[116] Pornography and capitalism cannot be separated. The former is driven by a compulsion to reveal all details dictated by the market's needs [S3].

However, there is also a third factor that overlaps this relationship: racism. Doralice, apart from Sharon, the nightclub bartender, is the only Black female in the game. Meanwhile, most of the other characters are white Americans. Moreover, the white establishment sets the rules of the murder party in which the protagonist of *Fascination* participates [S3]. Thus, by leaving the space of the murder party, Doralice symbolically escapes the vicious circle of capitalism, pornography, and racism. Doralice abandons the state that Simone de Beauvoir describes as "being doomed to immanence."[117]

Still, the freedom gained is incomplete. As Michel Foucault puts it: "In order to exercise a relation of power, there must be on both sides at least a certain form of liberty… If there are

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[115]   David Fincher, *The Game*, DVD (United States: PolyGram, 1996).
[116]   Lynda Nead, *Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (New York – London: Routledge, 1992).
[117]   Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Howard Madison Parshley (1949; repr., New York: Knopf, 1956), 609.

relations of power throughout every social field, it is because there is freedom everywhere."[118] Although Doralice succeeds in saving her life at the murder party, she cannot fully challenge its rules. Doralice's struggle against sexual repression is "nothing more, but nothing less… than a tactical shift and reversal in the great deployment of sexuality."[119]  Therefore, while being undoubtedly the best erotic game in Tramis's oeuvre, *Fascination* also demonstrates the limitations of porn auteurism.

Tramis's Erotic Trilogy may not have ultimately fulfilled its liberating potential. However, in this trilogy, Tramis's auteurism is most clearly evident. In her ostensibly pornographic works, Tramis dismantled the idea of pornography itself. Whereas traditionally, pornography provides the viewer with fleeting pleasure, Tramis's Erotic Trilogy deprives the player of that stimulation. Furthermore, the syncretism of the logic and arcade challenges confuses these games' users. Above all, the Erotic Trilogy changes the perspective on the Other. In *Emmanuelle*, the woman is not an object but a partner in a mutual dialogue with the player. In *Geisha*, the player castrates male subjectivity, challenging religious dogma (the myth of Adam and Eve) and proving the fraud of Freudian thought. Finally, in *Fascination*, the woman—let us add, the *porte parole* of Tramis herself—becomes the subject through whom the player observes the world.

The Erotic Trilogy could not, however, be extended with other games. Coktel Vision's decision to withhold erotic games was probably due to Western European countries' crusade against digital pornography. In 1992, Coktel was planning to release its games exclusively on CD-ROM. Since the new legislation treated pornographic games on CDs the same as erotic films (taxed at 50% of income), producing them was no longer profitable. In addition, the takeover of Coktel by the American Sierra On-Line, and thus the company's internationalization, involved adapting the content to British and American legislation. The campaign against digital pornography swept through the UK, forcing creators to choose "safe" topics Michel Desangles[120]. The signal was clear: the end of pornography had arrived, so it was necessary to turn to more escapist content. Thus, Tramis embraced fantasy iconography.

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Figure 4.8: Screenshot from *Gobliiins* (Coktel Vision, 1991), playfully depicting the effects of enchanting a mole.
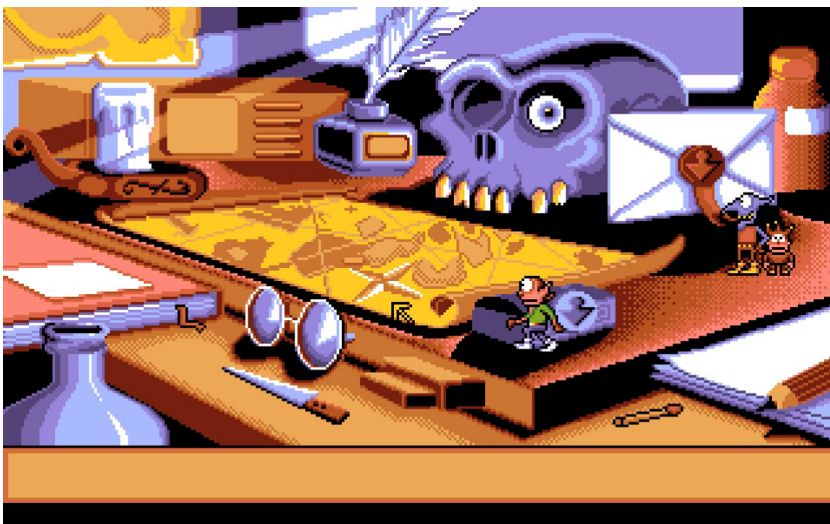


Figure 4.9: Screenshot from *Gobliins 2* (Coktel Vision, 1992), inspired by Pieter Claesz's work.

### 4.2.9  *Gobliiins* (1991–1993)

In 1991, Tramis began collaborating with the surrealist painter Pierre Gilhodes on the *Gobliiins* trilogy, considered the most famous work by both designers. However, one can speak of a joint authorship negotiation in this case. Gilhodes developed the trilogy concept, and he also created its graphic design. To him, one can attribute the caricatured portraits of characters with bulging eyes, stretched lips, and psychedelic landscapes, which are maintained in the poetics of dreams [S1]. Tramis described Gilhodes's style as: "An absurd universe and completely offbeat. What comes closest to it is the very British humor of Monty Python, but it is even more delirious."[121]

While working on the formative games of the trilogy—*Gobliiins* (1991), *Gobllins 2: The Prince Buffoon* (1992), *Goblins 3* (1993)—Gilhodes created brilliant, dreamlike settings. As a result, the trilogy features such oddities as "spaghetti trees" (*Gobliiins*) or drug trip visuals (*Gobliiins 2*). Gilhodes was also responsible for sophisticated references to paintings, such as Pieter Claesz's *Vanitas* (1630), which appears in the second part of the trilogy (Figure 4.9).

However, since I do not examine Gilhodes's work, I would like to focus on those elements of the trilogy to which Tramis could contribute. These elements are the script and logic puzzles on which Tramis worked closely with Gilhodes. In previous subsections, I have argued that Tramis's two previous trilogies contained both imaginative logic puzzles and dealt with social injustices. Now, I will examine both the *Gobliiins* trilogy and another game that was co-created by Tramis and Gilhodes, *Woodruff et le Schnibble d'Azimuth*.

Indeed, the *Gobliiins* series is commonly associated with a very high difficulty level. For example, one can cite Polish journalist Piotr Mańkowski's account that the trilogy "was praised by some for its visual surrealism, while others considered the puzzles it contained to be the height of the stupidity that was beginning to grip the entire adventure genre."[122] Although the interface of the series is simplistic, the game imposes elaborate challenges on the player. Let us use an example from the first part of the trilogy, *Gobliiins* (1991). The player can control three of the titular goblins. One of them (Oups) can collect and use items, the second (Asgard)

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118  Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, Helmut Becker, and Alfredo Gomez-Müller, "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom. An Interview with Michel Foucault on January 20, 1984," trans. J. D. Gauthier, *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 12, no. 2-3 (1987): 123, https://doi.org/10.1177/019145378701200202.

119  Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 131.

120  "News : Censure," *Joystick*, no. 42 (1993): 13.

121  Ilmari, "Interview with Muriel Tramis" (The Adventure Gamer, March 19, 2018), https://archive.is/3zpvz.

122  Piotr Mańkowski, *Wielka księga gier. Historia gier wideo od Ponga do Battle Royale* (Warszawa: Idea Ahead, 2018), 329.

can hit them with his fist, and the third (Ignatius) can transform them using magic [L1]. For example, in the first playable location, the correct sequence of actions is as follows [L2]:

- Asgard, Oups, and Ignatius stand before a stone gate with a horned skull. A tree grows nearby.

- Asgard strikes the stone gate with his fist, from which a horn falls out;

- Oups takes the horn and blows on it, causing a branch to fall from a nearby

- Ignatius turns the branch into a pickaxe.

The sequence above illustrates the abstract reasoning the player must adopt to complete a single level. *Gobliiins* deliberately eschews Western European *logos* even at its mechanics. Instead, the game—as well as its two sequels—favors the liberating logic of dreams.

The problem-solving mechanics remain the same throughout the trilogy, except for the number of playable characters and their tasks [L1]. In the first part of *Gobliiins*, the three characters have strictly assigned actions to each other. A wrong move made by the player (such as direct contact with an enemy creature) is punished by a health drop for all controlled characters [L4]. In the second part of the trilogy, *Gobliins 2: The Prince Buffoon* (1992), the player controls two goblins: Winkle and Fingus, who, by the way, already have similar abilities; this time, however, improper actions by the player do not result in the death of these characters [L4]. Finally, in *Goblins 3* (1993), only one goblin named Blount remains. However, he can count on the help of one of his companion animals, so the entire trilogy is tied together by one factor: close cooperation. For example, avatars can help each other reach inaccessible level parts or carry heavy objects [L2].

Although the puzzles designed by Tramis are characterized by abstract humor, it would be a mistake to think they have no cultural basis. In the *Gobliiins* series, phallic motifs and sexual allusions are omnipresent, making the trilogy aimed at adults. For example, in the first installment of *Gobliiins*, the three protagonists must sneak through a graveyard gate without being spotted by a demonic sorcerer preparing a potion in the graveyard [L1]. When the player guides Oups and Ignatius to the other side of the level, they can cast a spell on the mole that sticks out from behind the dug burrow. The mole then turns into a naked woman who distracts the sorcerer (Figure 4.8) [S1]. In this case, the keyword connecting the mole and the woman would be "fur" (*poil*). Thus, the mole is a fur animal, while the naked woman refers to the French idiom *se mettre à poil* ("to strip naked") [S3].

Another example of a puzzle that escapes logical reasoning but refers to language is in *Gobliins 2*. Here, the passage towards the royal castle is guarded by a rabid dog watching over a pothole in the road [L2]. The solution to the puzzle is to order one of the goblins to put a sausage through one hole with the end sticking out through the other hole. When the dog tries to grab the sausage, the chosen goblin hits and stuns it, paving the way for another avatar [L1]. The puzzle is a phallic metaphor: a sausage as a penetrating organ, a hole as a penetrated organ [S3]. Another allusion understandable to adults is the "mushroom" metaphor. Winkle and Fingus infiltrate the psychedelic world like on a drug trip by swallowing mushrooms. Then the setting is illustrated by music stylized on stereotypical Indian sounds [S3, S5].

The striking surreal imagery of the *Gobliins* trilogy also permeates its ludonarrative layer. Admittedly, the first part of the game relies on a predictable battle with an evil sorcerer. In the opening sequence, he tortures King Angoulafre, who rules the medieval land, using a voodoo doll. In *Gobliins 2*, the quest of two goblins to rescue the king's son, mentioned earlier and kidnapped by feral orcs, does not go beyond the cliché of post-Tolkien fantasy. But *Goblins 3* shocks with its brutality [N1].

The protagonist of *Goblins 3* is a journalist named Blount, who arrives in a strange land to reconcile the rulers of two opposing kingdoms: the ruler of heaven, Queen Xina, and the ruler of darkness, King Budd [N3]. However, Blount is unfortunate enough to fall overboard while traveling in an airship. Miraculously surviving the fall, he spots a group of gnomes led by King Bodd. They have kidnapped a beauty named Wynonna. Enchanted by her, Blount defeats one enemy after another in an effort to save her, but Bodd grabs him and throws him into a cave where a wolf eats him [N3].

After his physical demise, Blount loses his sense of self. Awakening in perpetual darkness, he emerges with a constantly shifting identity. He alternates between a giant and a dwarf, becoming a violent werewolf before reverting to his half-human form.[123] Neither Blount nor the player can control these transformations [L2, N3]. In line with the postmodern thinking popular in the 1990s, Blount "lost the decisive influence over his own identity… has ceased to be a subject in the Cartesian sense—stable, integrated, self-aware, and rational."[124] Meanwhile, Wynonna is imprisoned by Fourbalus, a sorcerer who controls the labyrinth connecting two kingdoms and turns her into a butterfly [N1].

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[123]  Blount is neither fully human nor goblin. The final sequence of *Goblins 3* reveals that Blount was once the son of Angoulafre, but Winkle and Fungus raised him.

[124]  Jacek Kubera, "Po postmodernizmie, czyli silne identyfikacje i słabe tożsamości," *Nauka*, no. 1 (2013): 98.

Blount and Wynonna are quintessential Freudian characters. Adhering to traditional gender roles, which were reinforced or even co-created by Sigmund Freud in his essay *The History of Child Neurosis*, the wolf embodies the primitive paternal figure,[125] while the butterfly represents an equally primitive maternal figure.[126] Blount symbolizes wild masculinity, and Wynonna embodies ethereal femininity [N3, S3].  To regain his humanity, Blount must navigate the labyrinth, face death in an unusual chess variant, and approach Wynonna's tower using a mandolin stolen from the protagonist of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Eventually, the tower gate opens, allowing the hero to reunite with Wynonna in a loving embrace, and restoring peace between the feuding kingdoms [N1].

The *Gobliiins* trilogy represents a clash of distinct design personalities. Gilhodes, a passionate surrealist, favored provocative caricatures and extreme forms of expression, such as objectifying female characters and alluding to drug trips, which led to the Freudian themes in the trilogy. Conversely, Tramis, responsible for the screenplay and puzzle design, aimed to debunk Freud's outdated psychoanalysis, as demonstrated in *Geisha*. Gilhodes's creative madness served as a counterbalance to Tramis's refinement. In the first two installments of *Gobliiins*, Gilhodes's temperament dominated, while the third showcased Tramis's finesse. In an interview with *Tilt*, Gilhodes mentioned Tramis before himself when discussing their work on *Goblins 3*'s script.[127]

The duality of the *Gobliiins* trilogy was apparent both in the designers' collaboration and the games' reception. Neither French nor English speakers considered the series as distinctly their own. English-language reviews emphasized its quintessentially French flavor Jonathan Nash[128], while in France, *Gobliiins* was viewed as an Anglo-Saxon trilogy, influenced by Tex Avery's American cartoons or LucasArts studio games Yann Hochet Renouard[129]. Nonetheless, *Gobliiins* can be seen as a transnational trilogy marked by dual tensions (male-female and English-French), particularly evident in *Woodruff et le Schnibble d'Azimuth*, the pinnacle of Tramis and Gilhodes's collaboration.

Figure 4.10: Screenshot from *Woodruff et le Schnibble d'Azimuth* (Coktel Vision, 1994), depicting the city's lower parts; a depressed Bouzouk is on the lower right.

### 4.2.10  *Woodruff et le Schnibble d'Azimuth* (1994)

After the inventive *Gobliiins* trilogy, Tramis and Gilhodes continued their collaboration on another game, one more closely aligned with the ludic conventions established by Sierra On-Line and more socially engaged. As Tramis told in an interview with Piotr Mańkowski:

> We returned to the classic point-and-click scheme and expanded the storyline. We wanted to create a world of absurdity, one that some irrational rules would govern. Characters talked to each other in ornate language and looked strange; at the same time our characters had quite earthly problems. They struggled with xenophobia, unemployment, censorship, the tax mess.[130]

The dissonance between unconventional gameplay and serious themes probably resulted from negotiations between Coktel Vision and *Woodruff*'s international publisher, Sierra On-Line, which acquired Coktel in 1993. Sierra gradually distanced itself from erotic content to

125   Sigmund Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis," in *Three Case Histories*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 218.

126   Ibid., 282–83.

127   Jacques Harbonn, "Interview Pierre Gilhode Graphiste Et Coscenariste," *Tilt*, no. 118 (1993): 33.

128   "Goblins 3," *Amiga Power*, no. 34 (1994): 44–45.

129   "Goblins 3: Rire à Gogob," *Joystick*, no. 60 (1993): 100–104.

130   Cf. Piotr Mańkowski, "Muriel Tramis: Przez dekadę pisała przygodówki," *Secret Service*, no. 11-12 (2014): 47.

maintain a more family-friendly image.[131] As a result, *Woodruff* evolved into a Sierra-like point-and-click game, adopting the side perspective characteristic of the American company [N2], but without the graphic violence and explicit sexual content found in *Fascination* and the *Gobliiins* trilogy. Nonetheless, the game was not suitable for children, as many puzzles demanded the illogical thinking typical of the *Gobliiins* trilogy, such as remotely summoning specific weather phenomena to access certain items [sic!] [L2]. Social criticism also permeated the game's content.

*Woodruff* is set in a post-nuclear war world. The few human survivors on Earth have, after several centuries, united and directed their anger towards a race of mutants called the Bouzouks. After massacring the Bouzouks, humans forced them into slave labor to construct the grand city of Vlurxtrznbnaxl. The city's population stratification is highly symbolic: the tyrannical mayor of Vlurxtrznbnaxl, Déconnetable, resides in the highest tower, while impoverished urban citizens inhabit the lowest areas (see Figure 4.10) [N1].

Let us examine the Bouzouk race mentioned earlier. It can symbolize any nation conquered by European settlers in North America. For example, Native Americans along the Canada-US border use *boo-zhoo* to say to say "good morning."[132] However, as the game progresses, it becomes clear that the Bouzouk race's fate resembles that of the Ashkenazi Jews during World War II. First, have a distinct physical appearance, including tails, large ears, and prominent humped noses [S1]. This can be linked to far-right propaganda, including Hitler's, which targeted Jews based on their facial features.[133] [S3] Second, Bouzouks are enslaved and systematically exterminated by humans. Third, and most crucial to the plot, they await a Messiah who can bring peace to Earth. This Messiah is the creature called Schnibble, into whom the protagonist transforms during the game [N1, N3]. In fact, the French title *Woodruff et le Schnibble d'Azimuth* (*Woodruff and the Schnibble of Azimuth*) is a homonym for *Woodruff* **est** le Schnibble d'Azimuth, meaning *Woodruff* **is** the Schnibble of Azimuth.

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131  Thomas Ribault, "#MadeInFrance 10 : Tequilas & Tomahawks - the History of Coktel Vision" (Abandonware France, March 31, 2020), https://www.abandonware-france.org/ltf_abandon/ltf_infos_fic.php?id=103372.

132  Edward Benton-Banai, *The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway* (St. Paul: Indian Country Press, 1988), 1.

133  Since the Middle Ages, Christian fundamentalists had been fixated on "Jewish" humped noses, which were supposed to connote stench, cunning, and promiscuity. World War II brought the tragic climax to this "search for the Jews". To survive, Jews had to mask their external traits because only being recognized as an "Aryan" could save them from death. See William Brustein, *Roots of Hate: Anti-Semitism in Europe Before the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 122; Zoë Roth, "'You Can Change Your Noses, but You Can't Change Your Moses': Olfactory Aesthetics and the Jewish 'Race'," *L'Esprit Créateur* 59, no. 2 (2019): 72–87, https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.2019.0017, pp. 76-77.

Woodruff, who becomes the Bouzouks' hope, is of mixed race—half-human, half-Bouzouk. Raised by his single father, Professor Azimuth, their laboratory is suddenly raided by the secret police. After hiding Woodruff, Azimuth is brutally beaten and arrested by the police. One officer shoots Woodruff's cherished teddy bear, ripping the toy apart [N1, S1].

The childhood trauma experienced by the hidden mixed-race individual accelerates his maturation, especially as Woodruff suddenly grows up under stress. He also becomes increasingly aware of events in the game world. Woodruff learns to read from a barmaid who knows Azimuth, allowing the player to understand government propaganda posters' content. He also becomes conscious of the Bouzouks' daily oppression. Inhabitants of the lower parts of Vlurxtrznbnaxl stumble around in drunkenness, displaying sad expressions. Some, like the prostitute in the Pleasure Quarter—once the Bouzouk King's secretary—have fallen to the bottom of the social ladder. This awareness of the Bouzouks' plight drives Woodruff to rebel against the people [N1].

However, Woodruff must assemble all the so-called Council of Sages members to exact revenge on humans for years of Bouzouk oppression. Having lost their skills during their captivity, the Sages need to be endowed with syllables found in the game, corresponding to their specializations. For example, the Word Sage should receive the elemental syllable, the Health Sage the medical syllable, and the Force Sage the energy syllable [N1]. Woodruff also gains additional abilities by combining three syllables each into formulas. These formulas, spoken aloud by the character, can alter the presented world [L2]. For instance, Woodruff can travel to the mortal world and rescue a Bouzouk trapped under rocks using formulas [L3]. A "tobozon" device also aids him in navigating the game's narrative. The tobozon collects four-letter access codes given to Woodruff by NPCs he encounters [L2]. These codes must be entered to access specific rooms and caches [L2, S1]. Gathering items, syllables, and formulas helps the protagonist prepare for the final confrontation with Déconnétable [L2].

Thus, *Woodruff* is a game about the gradual acquisition of self-knowledge [S4]. Returning to the Jewish analogy, a similarity emerges between the process of acquiring and pronouncing magical syllables and the Jewish Kabbalah. Katarzyna Kornacka-Sareło, drawing connections between the Kabbalah and the philosophical thought of Martin Buber, writes that:

> Both the Kabbalists and Buber see man in the process of his existence, that is, in the process of becoming man. …What facilitates man's achievement of an almost divine status is the dialogue conducted with other people, or rather the words that

man is able to utter. Human words create not only the subject who utters them, but they also influence the ontic state of the addressee of the utterance.[134]

The dialogical dimension mentioned by Kornacka-Sareło showcases Muriel Tramis's writing talent. Unlike Pierre Gilhodes and Stéphane Fournier, who were responsible for the script, Tramis focused on coordinating the project and writing the game's dialogues. These dialogues, however, conceal the most significant layer of meaning. From the beginning, Tramis intended for the conversations between Woodruff and other characters to be ornate. As time passes, the protagonist employs more refined language in his conversations and assigns an almost god-like dimension to words (specifically, clusters of syllables) [S2]. Buber writes, "The relation with man is the real simile of the relation with God; in it true address receives true response; except that in God's response everything, the universe, is made manifest as language."[135]

Woodruff turns out to be the Messiah. He enriches his speech skills through contact with other characters, which Buber refers to as the I-Thou relationship. Meanwhile, his arch-enemy, Déconnétable, sits in the highest tower, isolated from the city's other inhabitants [N1]. Déconnétable occasionally addresses the citizens via television, thereby initiating only the I-It relationship. As one of Buber's followers wrote, such a conversation is "unbridgeably separate from genuine dialogue. It is much closer to propaganda, which seeks to win the individual over for a cause."[136] Thus, Déconnétable, exposed by Woodruff, conceals the antipathetic beast depicted in the propaganda posters targeting the Bouzouks. In the final scene, after defeating Déconnétable, Woodruff detaches the tyrant's puppet from the television camera to re-establish just rule [N1].

*Woodruff et le Schnibble d'Azimuth* is a bittersweet game. On one hand, Gilhodes, Fournier, and Tramis incorporate comic references to popular culture, such as the bestseller *Doom*[137] [M5]. On the other hand, *Woodruff* addresses essential themes of racism and white people's aggression, social injustice, and genocide. Behind the surreal humor (for which Gilhodes and Fournier were mainly responsible) lies Tramis's social sensibility, most evident in the game's dialogues.

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[134]    Katarzyna Kornacka-Sareło, "Ontologia kabały żydowskiej oraz jej etyczne implikacje w myśli dialogicznej Martina Bubera," *Przegląd Filozoficzny. Nowa Seria* 24, no. 4 (2015): 181.

[135]    Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Collier Books, 2007), 103.

[136]    Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956), 124.

[137]    John Romero, Tom Hall, and Sandy Petersen, *Doom*, version DOS (id Software, 1993).

### 4.2.11 The rest of Tramis's games

Having examined the Postcolonial Trilogy, the Erotic Trilogy, and the series of games co-created with Pierre Gilhodes, one might think that Muriel Tramis's output was reasonably consistent. However, it should be kept in mind that Tramis was also involved in creating games that deviated from the themes characteristic of her work. Here, the auteur theory encounters certain obstacles, and fairness dictates at least a cursory characterization of games that escape the themes of colonialism, racism, or sexism.

For example, shortly after completing *Méwilo*, Tramis designed *Blueberry*,[138] an adaptation of Jean-Michel Charlier and Jean Giraud's picture novels set in the realities of the Wild West. Tramis received the volume *Le Spectre aux balles d'or*[139] as concrete material for the adaptation. The main character of the series, Civil War veteran Mike S. Blueberry, roams the American wilderness searching for a criminal of German origin, "Prosit" Luckner. Blueberry's goal is to bring Prosit to justice.

The fundamental problem with *Blueberry* is that the game copies both the script and the art layer from the comic book original. As a result, there is little interaction with the presented world. The player can click on items or characters in pop-ups, hoping that random actions do not end in the character's immediate death. At specific points, the player can participate in arcade sequences such as duels (shooting an enemy emerging from behind a rock without getting hit) and defense against Apache raids. However, the uneven distribution of exploration and arcade elements and the clunky mechanics that push the action forward make *Blueberry* an awkward game. Moreover, there is an ideologically ambiguous element of the game—the sequence of shooting at aggressive Apaches—which is clearly at odds with the message of Tramis' Postcolonial Trilogy.

Tramis was also responsible for poorly designed arcade games based on animated films. For example, *The Jungle Book*,[140] with Gerald Bonga and Raphaël Dorlan's script, allowed players to control Mowgli, known from the Disney adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's novel. However, the game features trivial mechanics. For instance, Mowgli has to throw coconuts, bananas, and torches at on-screen enemies like the snake Kaa, the tiger Shere Khan, and even the panther Bagheera and the bear Baloo [sic!]. The result was so bizarre that Tramis withdrew her name from the game's credits. Also, a game based on the film *Asterix and the Big Fight*,[141] this

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[138] Coktel Vision, *Blueberry*, version Amstrad CPC (France: Coktel Vision, 1987).

[139] Jean-Michel Charlier and Jean Giraud, *Le Spectre aux balles d'or*, Blueberry 12 (Paris: Dargaud, 1972).

[140] Coktel Vision, *Le Livre de la jungle*, version Atari ST (France: Coktel Vision, 1988).

[141] Coktel Vision, *Astérix et Le Coup Du Menhir*, version Amiga (Coktel Vision, 1989).

time signed by Tramis, was merely an inferior reprise of the film. Olivier Hautefeuille of Tilt magazine categorized the *Asterix* adaptation as "a nice program, but barely playable in the long run. It's a shame."[142]

The game *Olivier & Compagnie*[143] was similarly problematic. Tramis created it with Lionel Faure. In this variation of the Disney film, the player controls the titular stray cat by completing four mini-games. In them, one should: reach the shelter (while avoiding passersby and dogs); then catch the bones tossed by the pickpocket Fagin in time; in the next level, clean up the mess left by other abandoned animals; finally, prevent the attack of Dobermans on the shelter and collect all the notes scattered around the level. These mini-games result in a happy ending true to the film, with Olivier falling into the arms of Jenny, the girl who wanted to take him in. Nevertheless, while the film's theme of poverty and social injustice seemed close to Tramis, the arcade game convention did not utilize this theme effectively.

*La Légende de Djel*,[144] on which Tramis collaborated with illustrator Joseph Kluytmans, was also a failure. Narratively, *La Légende de Djel* replicated the well-known ancient Greek myth of Demeter and Korah. Only the scenery (in the game, closer to Celtic landscapes) and the names of the gods were changed. For example, the god of the underworld, Hades, is called Kaal in the game. However, the primary responsibility for the game design was borne by Kluytmans. Kluytmans put more heart into the game's aesthetics, making his girlfriend the mythological Korah's equivalent.[145] Unfortunately, Kluytmans's visually sophisticated artwork was not enough for positive reception: "strange and rather sloppily made,"[146] "implementation is poor, playability—bland."[147]

The exceptions above to the rule were created "on-demand" as blockbuster movies and myths adaptations. However, the biggest disaster in Tramis's output used to be called *Urban Runner*.[148] Its most essential creators were theoretically the heads of Coktel Vision: Arnaud Delrue and Roland Oskian. However, as Tramis claimed, she bore the actual responsibility for directing the game:

> I was in charge of organizing the set, directing the actors, setting up the scenes. We used Steadicam in the sequence of the crazy chase on rooftops and the abandoned

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[142]    Olivier Hautefeuille, "Rolling Softs : Asterix Et Le Coup Du Menhir," *Tilt*, no. 73 (1989): 79.

[143]    Coktel Vision, *Olivier & Compagnie*, version Amiga (France: Coktel Vision, 1989).

[144]    Coktel Vision, *La Légende de Djel*, version Amiga (France: Coktel Vision, 1989).

[145]    "Legend of Djel Preview," *Amiga Computing* 2, no. 3 (1989): 16.

[146]    Jean Delaite, "La Légende de Djel," *Génération 4*, no. 14 (1989): 59.

[147]    David, "Timber : Legend of Djel," *Joystick Hebdo*, no. 36 (1989): 12.

[148]    Coktel Vision, *Urban Runner*.

factory. I don't want to lie, but I think we were the first game developers to use Steadicam. One day of shooting translated to roughly 2 minutes in the game. In the end, my job included studying the scenes to look for miscommunications, such as a sudden change of clothing within a single location. I was responsible for all the finishing touches and tiring out the actors.[149]

*Urban Runner* was Coktel Vision's most costly venture. Sierra On-Line Publishing heavily influenced its production, dictating the subject (the protagonist was already an American in Paris) and the technology to Coktel. Following the trend of creating games using full-motion video technology, *Urban Runner* resembled an "interactive film"—expressly, the story of an innocent man framed for the murder of a drug dealer. The problem was that in *Urban Runner*, the film convention dominated the game convention. As Sébastien Tasserie wrote: "The story in *Urban Runner* has the material for a good film: suspense, adventure, action, and love. But let's not forget that it is first and foremost a game… I would rather call *Urban Runner* an excellent product for a mass audience, not a good game."[150]

Famous in the first half of the 1990s, the "interactive film" convention became increasingly outdated when *Urban Runner* was being developed. After all, that convention relied on poor acting, conventional sets, and limited mechanics. Unfortunately, *Urban Runner* did not escape these problems inherent in "interactive films." In addition, *Urban Runner* duplicated the more creative *Fascination* plot. For example, the plot against an innocent person did not lead to severe criticism of current politics. Furthermore, the game lacked authorial flair, as Tramis had to bow to co-production demands during its development.

*Urban Runner* suffered an irreparable commercial failure, likely contributing to Sierra's demise in 1998. When the Vivendi conglomerate acquired Coktel, Oskian left the company. Tramis continued her career exclusively in educational games. However, in 2003 she also ended her work at Coktel, which was already leaning towards collapse.[151]

### 4.2.12  Muriel Tramis as an Autrice

Despite the contradictions and departures in her work, Muriel Tramis deserves to be called an autrice in the sense proposed in Chapter 3. The following themes repeatedly run through her work in the design field:

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149  Cf. Mańkowski, "Muriel Tramis," 47.
150  Sébastien Tasserie, "Urban Runner : Foulées Fatales," *Génération 4*, no. 90 (1996): 131–32.
151  David Crookes, "Coktel Vision," *Retro Gamer*, no. 139 (2018): 46–47.

1. **Criticism of racism and colonialism**. This criticism resonates most strongly in *Méwilo* and *Freedom*. However, references to the plundering policies of white colonists also appear in *Lost in Time* and *Woodruff*.

2. **Praise of *métissage***. The characters in Tramis's games are often cultural hybrids, demonstrated by Alcipe (*Méwilo*), Doralice (*Lost in Time*), and Woodruff.

3. **Subversion of pornography**. *Emmanuelle*, *Geisha* and *Fascination* challenge the rules governing the pleasure of interacting with erotic software. As a result, pleasure in the Erotic Trilogy becomes disrupted.

4. **Sophisticated puzzles**. The hallmark of Tramis's games is the high difficulty level of the puzzles. These require the player to have extensive knowledge of the location of the action (*Méwilo*), get rid of logical thinking (*Gobliiins*), and even a bit of humor (*Fascination*).

5. **Authorial signature**. The most prominent example of this signature would be the figure of the shopkeeper in *Méwilo*. However, Black female characters, stylized as Tramis, also appear in *Geisha*, *Fascination*, and *Lost in Time*.

The recognition of Muriel Tramis as an autrice highlights her unique contributions to the digital game field of the 1980s and 1990s. As a Black female from outside the French metropolis, Tramis was often overlooked and excluded from the dominant narratives constructed by white Anglo-Saxon men in digital game history. However, her work is now being rediscovered, which is a positive development for the creator of *Méwilo*. Moreover, her legacy has paved the way for future game developers from postcolonial communities, such as Elizabeth LaPensée, who will hopefully face fewer obstacles in their pursuit of recognition and success in the industry.

## 4.3 Elizabeth LaPensée: The Digital Orator

### 4.3.1 Context: North America

As is widely known, descendants of French settlers in Canada, particularly in the French-speaking region of Quebec, harbor strong aspirations for independence, fueled by the myth of New France. Spanning from the founding of Fort Québec in 1608 to France's defeat in the Seven Years' War with Britain in 1763, they nostalgically view Canada's century-and-a-half of

colonization. However, such a sentiment is not shared by the descendants of the North American peoples, collectively known as the Anishinaabe, for whom French colonization brought death and devastation. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Anishinaabe population in Quebec ranged from 8,000 to 10,000 people. By 1763, their numbers had dwindled to 3,000. Marta Kijewska-Trembecka attributes this decline to wars, susceptibility to European diseases, and settlers' destruction of their former hunting grounds.[152]

The Anishinaabe's interactions with French settlers were not limited to physical violence. Some immigrants, independent traders known as *coureurs du bois*, raped and then married First Nations women. Consequently, they contributed to the Canadian Métis population.[153] The New France myth, therefore, relied on physical and sexual repression against First Nations people and French-Anishinaabe cultural exchange. This process is called *métissage*, which refers to problematic racial or cultural divisions fluctuating between homo- and heterogeneity. "*Métissage* is not synthesis, cohesiveness, osmosis, but confrontation, dialogue."[154] Although *métissage* may be misapplied to all forms of cultural mixture, it can still underscore the complex history of the Great Lakes region.

When the United Kingdom conquered New France in 1763, and part of the territory was incorporated into the United States 20 years later, the Anishinaabe's situation deteriorated further. The British-Canadian government sought to educate and assimilate the Indigenous people while severely undermining their economy by confiscating lands for the Crown.[155] Over time, British-Canadian policy toward the Anishinaabe has been labeled as genocide due to the oppressive nature of residential schools.[156] These schools for Anishinaabe children were underfunded, unsanitary, and experienced tuberculosis outbreaks that resulted in many deaths.[157]

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[152]  Marta Kijewska-Trembecka, *Québec i Québécois: ideologie dążeń niepodległościowych* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2007), 37.

[153]  Marcel Trudel, *The Beginnings of New France, 1524-1663* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973), 154–55.

[154]  François Laplantine and Alexis Nouss, *Le métissage: un exposé pour comprendre, un essai pour réfléchir* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997), 5, http://classes.bnf.fr/actes/8/laplantine.pdf.

[155]  J. R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada* (Toronto – Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 130–36, 216–20.

[156]  Brenda Elias et al., "Trauma and Suicide Behaviour Histories Among a Canadian Indigenous Population: An Empirical Exploration of the Potential Role of Canada's Residential School System," *Social Science & Medicine* 74, no. 10 (2012): 1560–69; Christopher Powell and Julia Peristerakis, "Genocide in Canada: A Relational View," in *Colonial Genocide in Indigenous North America*, ed. Andrew John Woolford, Jeff Benvenuto, and Alexander Laban Hinton (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 70–92.

[157]  John Sheridan Milloy and Mary Jane McCallum, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2017), p, 105.

The United States also established residential schools for the children of Native American peoples, which aimed to cause harm indirectly[158]. Nevertheless, U.S. policy toward the Anishinaabe—and other Native American peoples—relied on direct extermination. The United States government confiscated Native lands in the East. Furthermore, President James Madison's Indian Removal Act of 1830 forced many East Coast Natives to move to smaller reservations west of the Mississippi River.[159] The policy of resettlement, accompanied by massacres of Indigenous people,[160] continued until the 1890s. Jean-Louis Vullierme argues that the U.S. policy of confining First Nations to cramped reservations laid the foundation for European racist ideology, with consequences such as the atrocities of Nazism in Eastern Europe:

> As predicted by Indian Agents well-versed in the matter, the reservations quickly began to resemble prisons, becoming the perfect framework for the "legal murder of an entire people" through a "graceless, costly, and inhumane" process that spawned outbreaks. From the federal government's point of view, the cost of this process was indeed high, but it was calculated that it would still come out cheaper than military operations. Suppliers took advantage of the opportunity to supply spoiled goods and reduce their quantities, so the famine completed the process of destruction based on physical and cultural dispossession… One can argue that on a smaller scale, this was the same pattern as Nazi colonization: its radical brutality proved unnecessary.[161]

Ward Churchill also emphasizes that the everyday discourse about the genocide of Ashkenazi Jews (commonly known as the "Holocaust") dominates popular imagination, overshadowing

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[158]   See the work of influential Métis historian Ward Churchill on the cultural genocide of the Anishinaabe Indigenous people in Canada and the United States (Ward Churchill, *Kill the Indian, Save the Man: The Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2004), 29–44).

[159]   Ward Churchill and Glenn T. Morris, "Sand Creek: The Morning After," in *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance*, ed. M. Annette Jaimes (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 13–14.

[160]   Brendan C. Lindsay points out that the culmination of crimes against the Indigenous North American population occurred between 1849 and 1873 in California. Under the Act for the Government and Protection of Indians, white settlers could legally enslave and murder North American peoples without any legal consequences for the settlers. The so-called Indians, since 1854, did not even have the right to purchase arms or ammunition within California and, thus, the right to defend themselves against aggression by European settlers. During the mass murders of the natives, children were frequently kidnapped, women were raped, and villages were burned. Some murderers, such as George Crook, later received honors for their "true valor" in the fight against the so-called Indians (Brendan C. Lindsay, *Murder State: California's Native American Genocide, 1846-1873* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 245, 264, 307–11).

[161]   Jean-Louis Vullierme, *Miroir de l'Occident: Le nazisme et la civilisation occidentale* (Paris: Éditions du Toucan, 2014), paras. 8.111–8.113.

the tragic fate of other peoples. Such exterminations include the genocide of the Roma and Slavic peoples during World War II, the Armenians during World War I, and the so-called pre-Columbian Indians during the former millennium.[162] Furthermore, M. Annette Jaimes argues that although the Native Americans' hecatomb was not as quantitatively large as the Jews' and Roma's genocide during WWII, it was proportionate. The Jewish and Roma populations in Europe and the American First Nations were reduced by 75–85% due to carefully planned murder.[163] For the Indigenous North American population, the arrival of settlers from Europe meant:

> The fires that consumed North American Indians were the fevers brought on by newly encountered diseases, the flashes of settlers' and soldiers' guns, the ravages of firewater, the flames of villages and fields burned by the scorched earth policy of vengeful Euro-Americans.[164]

The genocidal domestic policies of European colonists in Canada and the United States also contributed to the disintegration of Anishinaabe communities. Additionally, the spread of alcoholism significantly impacted the breakdown of community ties among Native North Americans. Andrea Smith observed the destructive effects of so-called propination coercion on Indigenous peoples' mentality. Before colonization, violence against females from North American peoples was relatively low, primarily because 70% of the tribes lived peacefully. Propination coercion, however, increased the physical violence of North American husbands against their wives and consequently threatened Anishinaabe unity in ways desired by the colonists. Females became dual victims of colonial and patriarchal oppression.[165] Elizabeth LaPensée, along with Tramis, has been among the proponents of addressing the trauma suffered by the First Nations through digital games.

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[162]    Ward Churchill, *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas, 1492 to the Present* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997), 30–54.

[163]    The Indigenous population of North America declined from one million people in 1500 to 250,000 in 1900 after extermination by European colonists (M. Annette Jaimes, "Sand Creek: The Morning After," in *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance*, ed. M. Annette Jaimes (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 6).

[164]    Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History Since 1492* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), xv.

[165]    Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 20–21.

### 4.3.2 Short Biography

Unlike Muriel Tramis, who negotiated her position as an autrice within a commercial company, LaPensée creates games primarily from her role as an academic lecturer. Additionally, she meticulously describes the effects of her work in scholarly articles, justifying the procedural rhetoric inherent in her games' content.

LaPensée identifies with multiple nationalities, as she declares herself to be Anishinaabe, Canadian Métis, and Irish.[166] Her mother, Grace Dillon, is also of Anishinaabe descent,[167] while her father is Irish.[168] Introducing herself, she says: "I consider myself borderless like my mother and my family who never recognized the lines between Canada and the United States."[169] LaPensée justifies her fluid identity and detachment from either North American country by expressing a growing suspicion that:

> I'm already living in the post-apocalypse. For my communities, the world as we know it has already ended. Day-to-day I'm positioned within a colonial takeover that continues an agenda of genocide".[170]

LaPensée was captivated by digital games and wanted to portray her community's enduring trauma. However, she faced an obstacle that Tramis was no stranger to—the toxic habits of the commercial gaming industry.

> The moment I tried to work in the commercial game industry, I realized I didn't quite belong. My best experiences were with a community of game writers. We had our own support network and I always felt safe at events with them. But I quickly ran into women with horror stories, like being expected to go to strip clubs for work meetings. I was offered jobs I had to turn down because I couldn't be in an office culture where I would be teased about not drinking along with the guys. I've never gotten intergenerational damage, but I don't want to get into explaining that every time a situation comes up, so I just look like someone who won't play along.[171]

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[166] "Elizabeth LaPensée" (Michigan State University), accessed November 29, 2020, https://comartsci.msu.edu/our-people/elizabeth-lapensee.

[167] "Grace Dillon" (Lofoten International Art Festival), accessed November 29, 2020, https://2019.liaf.no/en/participants/grace-dillon/.

[168] Elizabeth LaPensée, "Elizabeth LaPensée," in *Women in Game Development: Breaking the Glass Level-Cap*, ed. Jennifer Brandes Hepler (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2019), 87.

[169] Ibid., 88.

[170] Ibid.

[171] Ibid.

In 2007, LaPensée made her debut in the digital game field as a co-writer and consultant on the ecosystem simulator *Venture Arctic*. Its lead author was Andy Schatz of the California-based Pocketwatch Games studio.[172] Nevertheless, Venture Arctic featured a theme of human exploitation of the environment that, as I will demonstrate, recurs in LaPensée's work. Her subsequent digital games were created outside the commercial circuit to educate her Anishinaabe community. Before that, however, she made a name for herself with the strictly educational social hypertext project *Survivance*. It focused not so much on playing as activating the Anishinaabe people. In a way, the project encouraged the community to create their artwork and articulate the presence of Indigenous people from the Canada-U.S. borderlands, thus helping to preserve their fragile culture. With her dissertation on *Survivance*, LaPensée received her Ph.D. at Simon Fraser University.[173] Since 2015, she has been regularly creating digital games funded by foundations and educational institutions.

### 4.3.3 *Venture Arctic* (2007)



Figure 4.11: Screenshot from *Venture Arctic* (Pocketwatch Games, 2007), where the player can infect elder beings to pave the way for the newborn ones.

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[172]   Pocketwatch Games, *Venture Arctic*.
[173]   Elizabeth LaPensée, "Survivance: An Indigenous Social Impact Game" (Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2014), https://summit.sfu.ca/item/13984.

Elizabeth LaPensée's early credit was *Venture Arctic*, where she worked as a writer and cultural consultant. In her gaming debut, LaPensée owed much to designer Andy Schatz, who considered her community's comments and remarks with understanding.[174] As a sequel of the similar ecosystem simulation game *Venture Africa*, *Venture Arctic* was a modest critical success when released on Windows [M1]. For instance, *Wired*'s Brad Moon aptly comprehended the game's message:

> Even at the less challenging Kid's level, young players can begin to understand cause and effect in the environment. Lack of snow cover on the ground means less spring melt, which in turn impacts plant growth, leading to stresses on animal populations that feed on that plant, for example.[175]

Indeed, *Venture Arctic* conveys that people should not interfere with environmental changes [S4]. However, the game co-developed by LaPensée within the Pocketwatch Games studio simulates the effects of these changes within the well-known god game genre. Players choose from five available arctic regions and observe their fauna and flora from a three-dimensional bird's-eye perspective [N2]. Players must maintain environmental diversity (as many biological species as possible) by performing god-like actions depending on the four seasons [L2].

For example, spring is the time for reproduction; players can impregnate specific species and seed new plants, which provide nutrition for animals. Summer is the melting season, allowing players to uncover snow-covered areas so animals can access grass. Autumn is the passing time; players can hasten the death of elderly animals, whose energy then feeds other species like crows (see Figure 4.11). Finally, winter is the resting period, during which players can regenerate infertile areas with snow. Additionally, players can accumulate points to introduce new species to the game world during winter [L3].

The ecosystem index, displayed in the upper right corner, fluctuates based on the player's actions. Its growth can result from introducing new species, preventing domination by certain species, and avoiding soil depletion harmful to wildlife [L3]. The game's objective—to boost the ecosystem index—is more challenging if players enable events such as climate change, deforestation, and ice melting. The impact of these events varies depending on the Arctic locations where the game takes place [S4].

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[174]   LaPensée, "Elizabeth LaPensée," 89–90.
[175]   Brad Moon, "Review: Venture Arctic – Can a Video Game Be Green?" *Wired*, July 20, 2008, https://www.wired.com/2008/07/can-a-video-gam.

LaPensée's writing is noteworthy, with the first level set in North America—specifically, Alaska, where oil extraction by companies since the 1980s has disrupted animal wildlife and contributed to local climate catastrophes[176] [S3]. As a representative of North American Indigenous people, LaPensée focuses on climate issues that threaten the traditional balance between humans and nature. Consequently, *Venture Arctic*'s procedural rhetoric emphasizes how easily this balance can be disrupted [S4].

The website *GameTunnel* recognized this message, naming *Venture Arctic* the best simulation game of 2007.[177] Writing for the same website, Russell Carroll highlighted the Inuit-inspired artwork that gave the game a unique appearance.[178] Inuit inspirations would become characteristic of LaPensée's future work. However, *Venture Arctic* was primarily developed by Andy Schatz, who programmed and produced the game. He was responsible for making LaPensée's ideas come true, taking care of the detailed simulations of animals' behavior, bringing LaPensée's ideas to life and handling the detailed simulations of animal behavior. For instance, if the player covers a grassy area with snow, animals like caribou move to other green fields, while melting snow and ice attract animals to new pastures. Thus, *Venture Arctic* did not showcase LaPensée's programming skills, but it paved the way for her future career as a digital orator.

### 4.3.4  *Ninagamomin ji-nanaandawi'iwe* (*We Sing for Healing*, 2015)

After *Venture Arctic*, LaPensée designed a social impact game *Survivance* (2011) and a collection of touchscreen mini-games titled *Gathering Native Foods* (2014). Both projects, aimed at engaging Indigenous communities in digital art, received critical acclaim but are no longer available to play.[179] *The Gift of Food* (2014), her subsequent project, is a board game co-authored by Elise Krohn to educate players about traditional Northwest Native foods.

However, I will focus on the first game entirely designed and programmed by LaPensée, *Ninagamomin ji-nanaandawi'iwe*.[180] This project embodied in the digital gaming sphere what LaPensée called survivance, "merging survival with endurance in a way that recognizes

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176   See Mohammad S. Masnadi and Adam R. Brandt, "Climate Impacts of Oil Extraction Increase Significantly with Oilfield Age," *Nature Climate Change* 7 (2017): 551–56, https://doi.org/10.1038/nclimate3347.

177   Russell Carroll, "2007 Sim Game of the Year by Game Tunnel" (GameTunnel, December 14, 2007), https://bit.ly/439QgY0.

178   Ibid.

179   Even so, LaPensée carefully documented *Survivance*'s creation in her Ph.D. thesis: LaPensée, "Survivance".

180   LaPensée, *Ninagamomin Ji-Nanaandawi'iwe*.

Figure 4.12: Screenshot from *Ninagamomin ji-nanaandawi'iwe* (Elizabeth LaPensée, 2015), emphasizing the organicity and spirituality of non-human beings.

Indigenous peoples as thriving rather than merely surviving."[181]  Understood as such, survivance (survival/endurance) is an act of resistance against cultural extinction. However, this resistance requires another artistic practice, which LaPensée named—after Leanne Simpson—*biskaabiiyang*. LaPensée defines *biskaabiiyang* (meaning "to return to ourselves" in Anishinaabemowin) as restoring Anishinaabe teachings and ways of gaining knowledge about the world. These research methods have an ultimate goal: regaining well-being and thriving.[182] Thus, *biskaabiiyang*, restoring what remained after the genocidal European presence, became the objective behind creating *We Sing for Healing* [S3].

*We Sing for Healing* is a variation on choose-your-own-adventure games [L1], though without any negative endings [L4]. LaPensée's game does not evaluate users' decisions but encourages them to immerse themselves in the lo-fi music [S5]. The latter, composed by Exquisite Ghost, accompanies the concisely described situations: "You space/time travel. Remember the battle, dream of dancing, or step out of the canoe." Depending on the choices made, players can contemplate nature and transform into other animals or participate in an endless battle where "the arrows fly as the warriors cry." Although engaging in the war (with an unspecified enemy)

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[181]    Elizabeth LaPensée, "Transformations and Remembrances in the Digital Game *We Sing for Healing*," *Transmotion* 3, no. 1 (2017): 91, https://doi.org/10.22024/UniKent/03/tm.243.

[182]    Ibid.

is more costly, LaPensée's design assures players that the paths taken represent different Indigenous life flows. Every earth-being returns to the world in another form [S4].

In transcending time and space, *We Sing for Healing* resembles a simpler version of Coktel Vision's *Inca*,[183] directed by Yannick Chosse and Stéphane Ressot. *Inca* focused on peculiar spaceship battles between Incan warriors and Spanish conquistadors (thus reversing the Spanish genocide of Incan people) [M5]. Meanwhile, *We Sing for Healing* eliminates the colonial presence altogether in the game world. This act of re-writing the past is therapeutic, as it facilitates restoring the traditional Anishinaabe people's approach to the present and future. As Bruce G. Trigger writes, using the example of Hurons, Anishinaabe's conventional thought assumed that "dreams were the language of the soul," and depressed members of the communities before the European presence were supported by their relatives.[184]

On the surface, *We Sing for Healing* does not directly address intersectionality beyond racial issues. However, LaPensée emphasizes that years of colonialism should not be countered with combat but with deconstruction. According to Mishuana Goeman, it is primarily Indigenous females who have been restoring collective First Nations' memories outside the colonial paradigms of exclusion and violence: "Rather than stand on the periphery, Native females are at the center of how our nations, both tribal and nontribal, have been imagined."[185] Goeman, echoing what Gerald Vizenor calls "stories of survivance," highlights Native females' essential ability to preserve the continuity of local cultures by using "new traditional and new tribal stories."[186] This role also falls to LaPensée, who, by depicting the aforementioned senseless tribal struggle ("the arrows fly as the warriors cry"), calls for rethinking anti-colonial resistance strategies in a more feminized manner [S3, S4].

In *We Sing for Healing*, the minimalist audiovisual illustrations correspond to the textual content. While they may initially appear abstract, the specific soundtracks powerfully stimulate the imagination. For example, aiming at enemies is accompanied by synth music with swishes resembling arrows. The visual content often displays beings (both humans and animals) in a lateral section, with only some organs visible (see Figure 4.12) [M5]. Despite their organic nature, the Anishinaabe viewed the world as "in which everything that existed, including

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[183]    Coktel Vision, *Inca*, version DOS (France: Coktel Vision, 1992).

[184]    Bruce G. Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660* (1976; repr., Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), 81.

[185]    Mishuana Goeman, *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 2.

[186]    Ibid., 3.

man-made things, possessed souls and were immortal."[187] Such aesthetics, emphasizing the organicism and equal spirituality of all beings, recur in other works by LaPensée.

### 4.3.5  *Invaders* (2015)



Figure 4.13: Screenshot from *Invaders* (Elizabeth LaPensée, 2015), depicting the rapidly increased waves of enemy invaders.

*Venture Arctic* and *We Sing for Healing* are constructive examples of games that depict the flow of life, consistent with common Anishinaabe beliefs. Meanwhile, *Invaders* represents the first example of a deconstructive game in LaPensée's oeuvre. Deconstructive—because *Invaders* challenges the Western myth of "our world" as a "sieged fortress" that can efficiently defend itself against the Other. *Invaders*'s predecessor, *Space Invaders*[188] was nominally a Japanese game designed by Tomohiro Nishikado, but it became a bestseller in the United States and Western Europe[189]. The game allowed the players to resist increasingly powerful waves of alien enemies while controlling a spaceship shooting laser guns. Eric Zimmerman cites *Space Invaders* as reflecting a "xenophobic invasion of the Other."[190] The Other could represent

187    Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic*, 75.
188    Taito, *Space Invaders*, version Arcade (Japan: Namco, 1978).
189    See Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire*, p. 15. Mia Consalvo adds that "*Space Invaders* had a title that worked in both Japan and North America, featuring gameplay with no dialogue apart from 'high score' and 'game over,' which were understandable to all players" (Mia Consalvo, *Atari to Zelda: Japan's Videogames in Global Contexts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 42).
190    Eric Zimmerman, "Eric Zimmerman's Response" (Electronic Book Review, August 1, 2004), https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/eric-zimmermans-response/.

the American cultural invasion of Japan or, conversely, the heroic clash between American individuals and imaginary Japanese collective hordes.[191] However, *Space Invaders*' meaning was ambiguous. Mia Consalvo cites Nishikado's confession that both Imperial invaders from *Star Wars* and sea creatures from local culture inspired his design of the game's attackers.[192] This ambiguity evaporates in LaPensée's reinterpretation of *Space Invaders* [S3, M5].

The gameplay of *Invaders*, like its predecessor, relies on defense against aliens. These crawl towards the bottom of the screen and shoot at the player with laser guns [L1]. However, whereas in Nishikado's game, the player could steer a spaceship equipped with a laser gun, LaPensée's playable figures are Natives armed with bows and arrows [L2, N3]. Thus, the level of difficulty increases rapidly. After handling the relatively easy first wave of invaders, the player quickly encounters a deluge of aliens using laser projectiles and firing missiles that flood the screen (see Figure 4.13) [L3]. Avoiding them is very difficult, and the only bonuses the player can collect allow for a temporary acceleration of their firing rate [L3]. Players realize that their fight is uneven. Moreover, every loss of a life point results in an Indigenous archer leaving the screen; if the player loses all archers, the game ends [L4].

As players can easily recognize, LaPensée's *Invaders* depict the culture shock which the indigenous people experienced upon encountering the better-equipped European settlers. Although the gameplay is similar to *Space Invaders*, the semiotic shift of the playable figure (a spaceship replaced with Indigenous archers) significantly changes the meaning of LaPensée's game [S4]. Thus, players become more aware of how the Europeans' overwhelming technological advantage decimated Indigenous people. *Invaders* is a minor masterpiece, dubbed even "[a] historically accurate representation of the Indigenous peoples struggle as more and more Europeans made their pilgrimages to America."[193]

### 4.3.6  *Mikan* (2017)

Having developed two iOS-exclusive singing games, *Singuistics*[194] and *Honour Water*,[195] LaPensée designed a variation on the traditional mocassin game in 2017 for the Duluth Children's Museum in Minnesota. *Mikan* ("find it" in Anishinaabemowin), programmed by Tyler

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191  Lindsay Grace, "Space Invaders at 40: What the Game Says about the 1970s – and Today," *The Independent*, June 21, 2018, https://bit.ly/3Wl7S0J.

192  Mia Consalvo, "Console Video Games and Global Corporations," *New Media & Society*, no. 1 (2006): 119, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444806059921.

193  Jake Dahl, "Invaders. 21st Century Digital Art," April 24, 2021, http://www.digiart21.org/art/invaders.

194  Pinnguaq, *Singuistics*, version iOS (United States: Pinnguaq, 2016).

195  Pinnguaq, *Honour Water*, version iOS (United States: Pinnguaq, 2016).

Coleman, is a finding game that allows the player to learn phrases referring to traditional objects used by Anishinaabe [L1]:

1. Mikan draws four of several dozen words, with their iconic representations seen on the screen.

2. The player's task is to choose an object. After doing it, the selected object's Anishinaabe and English meaning is read.

3. The four objects become hidden with cards, and the player needs to find the selected icon and word.

As the description suggests, *Mikan* is a relatively simple game. Because *Mikan* was dedicated to a juvenile audience, it has few elaborate challenges [L5]. However, LaPensée's work helps prevent the Anishinaabe people (especially children) from experiencing language attrition. German linguist Monika Schmid uses the term "language attrition" to describe how even healthy speakers forget their first languages.[196] The process does not concern only elderly people, as studies on young children indicate "far more drastic" symptoms of forgetting the first language [S3]. Traumatic experiences may also influence language attrition.[197] Thus, because Native Americans (especially children) traumatically experienced their military and cultural European conquest, *Mikan* aims to redevelop the culture and language of first nations [S4].

### 4.3.7 *Coyote Quest* (2017)

*Coyote Quest*, with narrative design and writing by LaPensée (and creative direction by Loretta Todd), is an edutainment game developed by Silverstring Media. Based on *Coyote's Crazy Smart Science Show* broadcast on the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, the game promotes Indigenous science [S4].

*Coyote Quest*'s action takes place in an Indigenous village where a strange incident occurs: a nearby mountain flips upside down [N1]. Among various tasks, the player must find a way to reverse this unusual event [L1]. The titular trickster Coyote serves as a guide, providing the player with hints and suggesting possible actions [N3]. The game is completed when the player accomplishes four major tasks (including several mini-games) and progresses through four natural seasons [L4].

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[196] Monika S. Schmid, *Language Attrition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 4–5.
[197] Sophie Hardach, "Can You Lose Your Native Language?" (BBC, June 6, 2018), https://bit.ly/3o9GpTm.

Figure 4.14: Screenshot from *Coyote Quest* (Silverstring Media, 2017), depicting a village
skatepark, where Janette tells about maintaining balance as a skateboarder.

The small world of *Coyote Quest* is where science and faith mutually influence each other.
Coyote tells the player, "Your ancestors knew how to use force wisely. They could move big
things with tools, community, and belief" [S2].  This enumeration is not coincidental.  The
game's village features three interconnected spaces: a laboratory, a garden, and a skatepark
[sic!] [L3].

The laboratory's scientist can produce helpful tools while completing the tasks. Meanwhile,
the garden managed by elderly Auntie Shiela symbolizes a communal place for villagers'
meetings. Each season, Auntie Shiela asks the player to harvest weeds from the garden; then,
a mini-game ensues, where one needs to find and root out all the weeds [L1]. Finally, in the
skatepark, the player meets Janelle, an experienced skateboarder who emphasizes the role of
belief in her sports success (see Figure 4.14): "When I focus on balancing my mind, body,
spirit, and emotions, it's smooth riding!" [S2]

As Joshua D. Miner asserts, Indigenous game design primarily aims to revitalize suppressed
nations' language and cultural heritage. The digital game medium reinvigorates "tribal solidarity
and cultural survival."[198]  Miner cites *Coyote Quest* as an exemplary edutainment game.[199]
One could add that its uniqueness lies in teaching young players (primarily Indigenous) that
traditional and scientific knowledge processes can complement each other.  This assertion

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[198]   Joshua D. Miner, "Critical Protocols in Indigenous Gamespace," *Games and Culture*, April 26, 2021, 13,
        https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211005366.
[199]   Ibid., 20.

makes *Coyote Quest* the opposite of what Western European secularism has been practicing.[200] Thus, LaPensée and Todd's work persuades the users that the Indigenous identity could mean more than superstition [S4].

### 4.3.8 *Thunderbird Strike* (2017)



Figure 4.15: Screenshot from *Thunderbird Strike* (Elizabeth LaPensée, 2017), where the titular character gets equal with nature-destroying humans.

LaPensée's other game—funded by Minnesota's Legacy Fund—sparked much controversy. As she described it:

> Oil lobbyists targeted *Thunderbird Strike*, ranging from a media smear campaign calling for completely shutting down the game to a failed attempt to revoke funding from the arts grant to then attempting to create a new bill to invoke a civil penalty on any art which is deemed by that governing body to promote domestic terrorism.[201]

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[200] Charles Taylor emphasizes that while "secular" initially meant simply the mundane mode of existence, currently, it belongs to an immanent sphere, contrary to the "transcendent realm," which has been perceived as "religious" (Charles Taylor, "Western Secularity," in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig J. Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 34).

[201] Elizabeth LaPensée, "Thunderbird Strike," in *Learning, Education & Games, Volume 3: 100 Games to Use in the Classroom & Beyond*, ed. Karen Schrier (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University ETC Press, 2019), 449.

That is not just the artist's imagination. A Republican senator from Minnesota, David Osmek, accused the game's creator of developing "an eco-terrorist version of *Angry Birds*", where players "blow up pipelines."[202]

Despite the inaccurate game genre reference, Osmek's concerns were astute. As LaPensée said in an interview for the Canadian Broadcasting Channel, she developed *Thunderbird Strike* to criticize the oil industry's investment in Turtle Island, where she lived. The oil pipeline, which would intersect the island, worried its inhabitants as potentially devastating—both for the environment and the human population[S3]:

> I was very concerned about and listening to the stories of my community members and storytellers and elders regarding there becoming a time when there will be a snake that threatens to swallow the land and the waters whole. So *Thunderbird Strike* really does reflect the stories of community member.[203]

*Thunderbird Strike*, like *Invaders*, was also designed with Unity and released on mobile platforms and the Windows operating system [M1, M2]. *Thunderbird Strike* also contains several video interludes [S5]. The first video creatively demonstrates how Lake Winnipeg in Alberta and the Great Lakes are connected by oil pipelines that transform into the aforementioned snake. Then, the player observes an animation depicting a row of trucks, followed by several animal corpses turning into living bodies. Finally, a mythological creature that North American indigenous people call Thunderbird appears [N1, S5].

Controlling Thunderbird, the player moves in a two-dimensional side-scrolling environment (4.15) [L3]. The gameplay is more straightforward during the first two levels than in *Invaders*. The player needs only to fly up, be charged by lightning, dive, and use the gathered energy [L2]. The player can do this in two ways: by destroying trucks, refineries, and oil wells; or reviving the corpses of animals and Indigenous people who lost their lives due to the investments [L2]. However, the game proceeds differently on the third level, when the player aims to defeat the snake that personifies the pipeline [L1]. On this level, *Thunderbird Strike* invokes the convention of side-scrolling shooting games, with "bosses" (big enemies) confronting the player in the end. To win the battle against the snake, one must attack its weakest point, marked with oil gushing from the "boss." [L2, L4]

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[202] Cf. Minnesota Senate Republicans, "Sen. David Osmek: MN Taxpayers Should Not Be Funding Angry Birds for Eco-Terrorists" (Minnesota Senate Republicans, October 26, 2017), https://bit.ly/3sbvl7m.

[203] CBC Radio, "Thunderbird Strike: Controversial Video Game Takes Aim at Oil Industry" (CBC, November 3, 2017), https://bit.ly/3Wl8541.

Having defeated the snake, the player observes the final video, showing possible ways to prevent the potential catastrophe in real life. These include, for example, restoring the populations of endangered species and replacing oil wells with wind farms [S4]. Of course, *Thunderbird Strike*, in its emerging message, can be called "eco-terrorist", as Osmek insists. Yet, about 3,000 US dollars which LaPensée earned for the game,[204] is nothing compared to Canadian oil and gas extraction companies reporting \$573.9 billion in total assets in 2017.[205] The game, which features few words, communicates its message clearly: oil companies must be stopped to save Turtle Island's animals and Indigenous people. This message could explain why the oil business reacted with disproportionate outrage.[206]

### 4.3.9 *When Rivers Were Trails* (2019)



Figure 4.16: Screenshot from *When Rivers Were Trails* (Elizabeth LaPensée, 2019), depicting Makwa's sister who fell for another female.

After developing *Thunderbird Strike*, LaPensée took part in the development process of *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*,[207] designed by Johnnemann Nordhagen. Nordhagen's game allowed for wandering across the United States during the Great Depression. The player's objective was to collect—mostly bleak—stories about the living conditions in the country.

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204 Minnesota Senate Republicans, "Sen. David Osmek".

205 Government of Canada, "The Daily — Oil and Gas Extraction, 2017" (StatCan, September 24, 2018), https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/180924/dq180924d-eng.htm.

206 CBC Radio, "Thunderbird Strike".

207 Dim Bulb Games, *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*, version Windows (Good Shepherd Entertainment: USA, 2018).

Although *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* was a commercial failure,[208] it helped LaPensée reconsider its idea for educational purposes.

*When Rivers Were Trails*, a project directed by LaPensée and Nicholas Emmons was advertised as "a 2D adventure game in which *Oregon Trail* meets *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*."[209]  The first title mentioned above has been regarded as the most successful educational digital game.[210]  However, *The Oregon Trail* has faced severe accusations.  According to accusers, the game privileged the white males' lifestyle, despite the presence of many female characters.[211]  It also suppressed the themes of slavery, ubiquitous in the 1840s when the action took place.[212]  Finally, it perpetuated "a racist narrative that privileges the ethos of white settlement through its refusal to engage directly with the genocidal consequences of westward expansion"[213] [S3].

Therefore, to paraphrase Spike Lee,[214] the white settlement in the American West was not a Western but a Holocaust, contrary to *The Oregon Trail*'s rhetoric. LaPensée herself, along with Emmons, stated that games like *The Oregon Trail* spread "false narratives" about Indigenous peoples through visual representations, design, and the actions required to win.[215]

*When Rivers Were Trails*, designed for Windows and iOS using Unity [M2], is an attempt to rewrite the problematic narrative of *The Oregon Trail* [M5].  While the player must also journey from the American East to the West, the context is different [L1].  The main character is not a white settler but an Anishinaabe exiled from Fond du Lac after enacting the Nelson Act in 1889 [N3].  The player's final destination is California.  However, before reaching it, the player character has to wander from the U.S.-Canadian border through the Mid-West, an

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[208]  Suriel Vazquez, "Where the Water Tastes Like Wine Sells Far Below Expectations, According to Creator. Game Informer" (Game Informer, March 31, 2018), https://bit.ly/3sdgI3r.

[209]  Indian Land Tenure Foundation, "When Rivers Were Trails by Indianlandtenure" (itch.io), accessed March 8, 2020, https://indianlandtenure.itch.io/when-rivers-were-trails.

[210]  Matt Jancer, "How You Wound Up Playing The Oregon Trail in Computer Class," *Smithsonian Magazine*, July 22, 2016, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/how-you-wound-playing-em-oregon-trailem-computer-class-180959851/.

[211]  Bill Bigelow, "On the Road to Cultural Bias: A Critique of The Oregon Trail CD-ROM," *Language Arts* 74, no. 2 (1997): 84–93.

[212]  Britta Lokting, "The Long Journey to Reveal the Oregon Trail's Racist History" (Narratively, October 11, 2017), https://narratively.com/long-journey-reveal-oregon-trails-racist-history/.

[213]  Katharine Slater, "Who Gets to Die of Dysentery?: Ideology, Geography, and The Oregon Trail," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (2017): 381, https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.2017.0040.

[214]  Gary Younge, "Spike Lee on Oldboy, America's Violent History and the Fine Art of Mouthing Off," *The Guardian*, December 1, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/dec/01/spike-lee-oldboy-interview-director.

[215]  Elizabeth LaPensée and Nichlas Emmons, "Indigenizing Education with the Game When Rivers Were Trails," *Amerikastudien-American Studies* 64, no. 1 (2019): 76, https://doi.org/10.33675/AMST/2019/1/8.

opportunity to meet Native Americans of various tribes affected by the General Allotment Act [N3]. This act gave federal agents the power to subdivide Native American reservation lands and displace their population. Thus, it contributed to the violent history of the U.S. genocidal policies towards Indigenous people[216] [S3].

*When Rivers Were Trails* consists of two types of screens. The first one shows top-down board-like fragmented maps of the United States where players move their character, choosing from several possible directions [S1]. Initially, the player has a fair amount of "well-being," medicine, and food [L1]. However, the food amount decreases each time the player encounters subsequent Indigenous people or random events [L2]. The player character dies if any of these factors reach zero [L4]. However, if the player gets to the map's end with some surplus left, progress is made, and the game loads another fragment of the United States [L3, N5].

Meanwhile, the game also features a couple of boards stylized like silent film subtitles [M5], which gradually inform the player about the fate of Native Americans in the country. The second type of screen consists of illustrated conversations with Indigenous people scattered around the United States, seen from the player's perspective [N1, N2]. Here, *When Rivers Were Trails* offers agency, allowing the player to make decisions affecting relations with other Native Americans and particular types of surplus. For example, the player can trade with Indigenous people, hunt with them, or help them choose their behavior towards federal agents [L2]. Dependent on the selected counsel, *When Rivers Were Trails* awards or punishes the player (by giving or taking some surplus) and unlocks trivia about the actual U.S. policy against Native Americans [L1]. These trivia were written by numerous Indigenous contributors representing multiple tribes, whose help became necessary for the game's credibility as an educational tool.[217]

*When Rivers Were Trails* differs from *The Oregon Trail* in in portraying indigenous people. Unlike in *The Oregon Trail*, the dominant non-playable characters the player talks to are Native Americans and African Americans [N3]. Although the in-game indigenous people belong to many tribes, their attitude towards the player is peaceful. For example, one of the Creek people, Wasu Maza says: "You were our great enemies once, but none of that matters now" [S2]. None of that matters because Native Americans have a common enemy: the white European settlers. Even after abolition, the situation of African Americans is not good, either. Wandering through

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[216] The persecution of first nations was curtailed in the 1930s, thanks to the work of John Collier, Commissioner for the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the President Franklin D. Roosevelt administration. See Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 297–321.

[217] LaPensée and Emmons, "Indigenizing Education with the Game When Rivers Were Trails," 79.

the West of the United States, the player can meet a Black porter at a train station and learn about his nearly servile work conditions. The porter has no name (everyone names him George, after the white industrialist George Pullman) and is treated as a servant. The in-game narrator explains: "He takes care of the passengers, serving all of their needs and… gets to sleep about three hours in a car separate from the white passengers" [S2].

*When Rivers Were Trails* also rewrites history in terms of gender. Memengwaa, a young female and a Two-Spirit, balancing masculine and feminine aspects, falls in love with the white representative's daughter (Figure 4.16). An Apsaalooke named Enemy-Hunter tells the player, "I was born a male but have the soul of a man and the soul of a woman" [S2]. In both examples, these in-game persons are not stigmatized within their communities. The Two-Spirits in many Native American societies were traditionally treated as gifted individuals who performed as spiritual leaders, teachers, or traders.[218] Therefore, the inclusion of non-binary characters in *When Rivers Were Trails*—and people of color—cannot equate with so-called "political correctness" [S3]. By introducing such characters, LaPensée and her co-workers brought justice to the groups never recognized in *The Oregon Trail* and many other games dedicated to the conquest of the West. Using mechanics similar to *The Oregon Trail* (for example, arcade sequences of hunting deer, fish, or buffaloes), *When Rivers Were Trails* deconstructs dominant European-white-male narratives about Indigenous people, solidified for years in other popular video games [S4].

At the same time, *When Rivers Were Trails* emphasizes the communitarian behavior of Native Americans, who had never exploited fauna and flora on such a scale as the European settlers. For example, a Salish Elder seen near the Lower Flathead River meaningfully says: "Not so long ago, rivers were homes and paths for us to visit with one another." Before the European settlers built artificial paths such as railroads, these rivers connected the people.

### 4.3.10  Elizabeth LaPensée as an Autrice

The research results allow me to consider Elizabeth LaPensée an autrice whose oeuvre overlaps the intersectional framework. As shown above, LaPensée's activity is rooted in feminine

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[218]  Lester B. Brown, ed., *Two Spirit People: American Indian, Lesbian Women and Gay Men* (New York: Haworth Press, 1997); Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, eds., *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Maia Sheppard and J. B. Mayo, "New Social Learning from Two Spirit Native Americans," *The Journal of Social Studies Research* 36, no. 3 (2012): 263–82; Maia Sheppard and J. B. Mayo, "The Social Construction of Gender and Sexuality: Learning from Two Spirit Traditions," *The Social Studies* 104, no. 6 (November 2013): 259–70, https://doi.org/10.1080/00377996.2013.788472.

Indigenous discourse and literature. While not all of her games strictly follow intersectional thought, LaPensée tackles themes of ethnicity and sexuality (for example, the appearance of Two-Spirits in *When Rivers Were Trails*) and promotes anti-masculinist values which are not destructive for the Indigenous communities. To summarize, one can identify the characteristic features of her oeuvre:

1. **Critique of racism and colonialism**. Just as in Tramis's games, LaPensée's contribution focuses on collective trauma resulting from the genocide of Native Americans. Furthermore, the Western exploitation of first nations, as LaPensée argues, overlaps with the destruction of the natural environment (*Venture Arctic*, *Thunderbird Strike*).

2. **Rewriting classic games for rhetorical purposes**. Titles credited by LaPensée frequently deconstruct the imperial rhetoric of classic games like *Space Invaders* and *The Oregon Trail*. For example, *Invaders* and *When Rivers Were Trails* critically rewrite well-known game mechanics to communicate Native Americans' traumatic experiences.

3. **Survivance**. Using the digital game medium, LaPenseé educates young Native players about their ancestors' lives and how their culture may thrive. LaPensée stresses through her works that the Indigenous communities can reconstruct themselves by strengthening cultural ties and cultivating ancient beliefs.

4. **Simple handling**. LaPensée aims to reach especially the young audience. Thus, games designed by her do not feature sophisticated puzzles, contrary to Tramis's output. Moreover, they play relatively simply.

Both Tramis and LaPensée's represent the postcolonial turn and insist on restoring the Native cultures and beliefs damaged by Western presence in the North America. Christine Love, whose oeuvre will be described in the next section, takes another stance. Heavily influenced by Japanese culture, Love uses genres traditionally attributed to Japanese game culture (visual novels, jRPGs) but transgresses them by merging sexual content with politics and criticism of patriarchy.

## 4.4  Christine Love: The Digital Artisan

### 4.4.1  Context: Queer theory

As Lilith Acadia says, queer theory does not restrict itself to reading "nonnormative gender, sexuality, and sex."[219] Moreover, it provides a tool for challenging seemingly apparent judgments of the world.[220] The queer theory's early pioneer was Michel Foucault.[221] In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault described how religion and the state regulate the discourse on sex over time.[222] Foucault emphasized our perception of sexuality is a social, unnatural construct. For example, pre-modern "prohibitions bearing on sex were essentially of a juridical nature. The 'nature' on which they were based was still a kind of law."[223] Those prohibitions (mainly against same-sex acts) gradually diminished in the nineteenth century, only to be replaced by medical categorization. For example, "homosexuality" did not appear until 1870.[224] In the nineteenth century, Western societies became obsessed with imposing "healthy" sexual relations, including procreation within the family; repressing masturbation; labeling "perverse" sexual encounters.[225] However, this imposition also produced resistance against dominant power relations.[226]

Foucault's historical account of sexuality was not the only one before the 1990s when the queer theory was established[227]. However, not without reason, another notable queer theory personality, Judith Butler, refers mainly to Foucault. Butler writes that binary sexuality regulation contradicts the diversity of sexual identities, enforcing repressive hegemonies.[228] Butler's argument against some feminists, such as Luce Irigaray, stated that they compromised "the feminist premise that biology is not destiny." Instead, they played the male game and used the

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[219]  Lilith Acadia, "Queer Theory," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, ed. Paula Rabinowitz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1003.

[220]  Ibid.

[221]  Ibid.

[222]  Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 1:25.

[223]  Ibid., 1:38.

[224]  Ibid., 1:43.

[225]  Ibid., 1:105.

[226]  Ibid., 1:95.

[227]  See, for example, the study by Thomas Walter Laqueur. Laqueur claims that the nineteenth-century scientific discourse stressing the fundamental differences between the sexes resulted from tumultuous political events such as the French Revolution. This discourse reduced females' role to merely reproductive purposes (Thomas Walter Laqueur, "Orgasm, Generation, and the Politics of Reproductive Biology," in *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Walter Laqueur (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 1–35).

[228]  Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 19.

physical apparatus to fight male oppression.[229] Meanwhile, Butler stresses that sex (biological sexual identity) and gender (cultural sexual identity) are different[230]. Of course, Butler's assertion that subversive gender performances (such as drag and cross-dressing) constitute a political remedy to oppression is disputable.[231]

Nevertheless, Foucault and Butler's writings, as well as works by Leo Bersani, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Michael Warner, remain crucial for queer theory. For example, Sedgwick noticed that the binary opposition 'homosexual/heterosexual' is hard to defend.[232] Marjorie Garber's studies on bisexuals, isolated or shunned either by heterosexuals and queer communities because of their alleged "heterosexual privilege," confirmed such assumptions;[233] Jay Prosser's work on transsexuality as "bodiliness of gendered crossings";[234] or Anthony Bogaert's examination of asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction to others.[235]

However, the queer expansion in scientific and mainstream discourses also brought a reaction. Bersani writes about "homophobic virulence… increased in direct proportion to the wider acceptance of homosexuals."[236] Despite increasing efforts to make LGBTQIA* communities a tolerated part of society[237], queer theory still faces severe issues. Part of these issues is the awkward links between male homosexuality and fascism that gays made themselves. The eroticization of fascism is evident in films by gay directors such as Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising*,[238] Luchino Visconti's *The Damned*,[239] and more notably, Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò, or the 12 Days of Sodom*.[240] Despite their allegedly rebellious potential, writers such as Susan

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[229] Ibid., 44.

[230] Butler names gender "a construction that regularly conceals its genesis": Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 154.

[231] For a critique of Butler's *Gender Trouble*, see Sara Salih and Robert Eaglestone, *Judith Butler* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 68-70.

[232] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1990), 22–63.

[233] Marjorie B. Garber, *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 39.

[234] Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

[235] Anthony F. Bogaert, "Asexuality: What It Is and Why It Matters," *The Journal of Sex Research* 52, no. 4 (May 4, 2015): 362–79, https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2015.1015713.

[236] Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 15.

[237] Homosexuality in 1991 was deleted from the World Health Organizations' global list of 'diseases'; in 2019, transsexuality was also excluded. See Dirk Schulz, "Truth Be Told, Science Be Bold. The Growing Fear of 'Queer'," *Gender Forum*, no. 78 (October 1, 2020): 3–21, pp. 6-7.

[238] Kenneth Anger, *Scorpio Rising*, DVD (1963; repr., United States: British Film Institute, 2000).

[239] Luchino Visconti, *The Damned*, Blu-ray (Warner Bros., 1969; Italy: The Criterion Colleciton, 2021).

[240] Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, DVD (United Artists, 1975; Italy-France: British Film Institute, 2008).

Sontag[241] and David Forgacs[242] indicated that these films reproduced damaging social views on same-sex relations. Such films show the limits of queer theory as an entirely progressive movement. Also, gays may occupy conservative or paleo-liberal viewpoints,[243] as evidenced by the presence of alt-right celebrity Milo Yiannopoulos.[244]

Still, the queer theory is not necessarily only about gays. It is about (playing) games. The latest attempts to reconcile the queer theory with digital games emphasize the need to undermine the stereotypes that a game must be *won* to deliver pleasure. For example, in *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, Bonnie Ruberg uses the "queer failure" concept introduced by Jack Halberstam. Queer failure means delight in failure; thus, Ruberg treats losing a game as a refusal of hegemonic norms that dictate how people should play.[245]

Moreover, a person who embraces the "playing to win" approach may miss out on richer experiences than conventional gameplay offers: 'Let us play boredom. Let us play anger. Let us play what hurts".[246] In a similar tone, queer game avant-garde encourages players to experience queer failure, as evidenced by Christine Love's works.

### 4.4.2 Short Biography

Christine Love specialized in visual novels since the late 2000s when she created several minor digital projects for Trent University in Ontario, Canada. She began her career in digital culture at a crucial moment, as the 2010s made queer culture in digital games much more inclusive than in the preceding decades. While Love declared she was not opposed to playing games about "shooting men," she labeled the gaming culture as "conservative" and too concerned with graphical realism.[247] Meanwhile, Love expressed the hope that exaggeration in the plot can uncover more realistic mechanisms of sexual discrimination:

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[241] Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," in *Under the Sign of Saturn*, by Susan Sontag (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 73–108.

[242] David Forgacs, "Days of Sodom: The Fascism—Perversion Equation in Films of the 1960s and 1970s," in *Italian Fascism*, ed. R. J. B Bosworth and Patrizia Dogliani (Place of publication not identified: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 216–36, https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-1-349-27247-1.

[243] Richard Goldstein, *The Attack Queers: Liberal Society and the Gay Right* (London and New York: Verso, 2002).

[244] Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the Alt-Right and Trump*, e-book (Winchester, UK ; Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2017), chap. 9.

[245] Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, 143.

[246] Ibid., 182.

[247] Cf. Meghan Blythe Adams, "Interview – Christine Love on Visual Novels, Sexuality, & Queer Representation in Games" (First Person Scholar, May 14, 2014), https://bit.ly/3MKRt2K.

If you want to learn something about the way people are, about the way people act,
the way things unfold, the way social systems work, I don't think realism is what
you should be focusing on there. Realism is trying to make sure every single blade
of grass looks perfect. But what does that actually teach you? So a lot of stuff I do,
I deliberately exaggerate.[248]

### 4.4.3  *Digital: A Love Story* (2010)
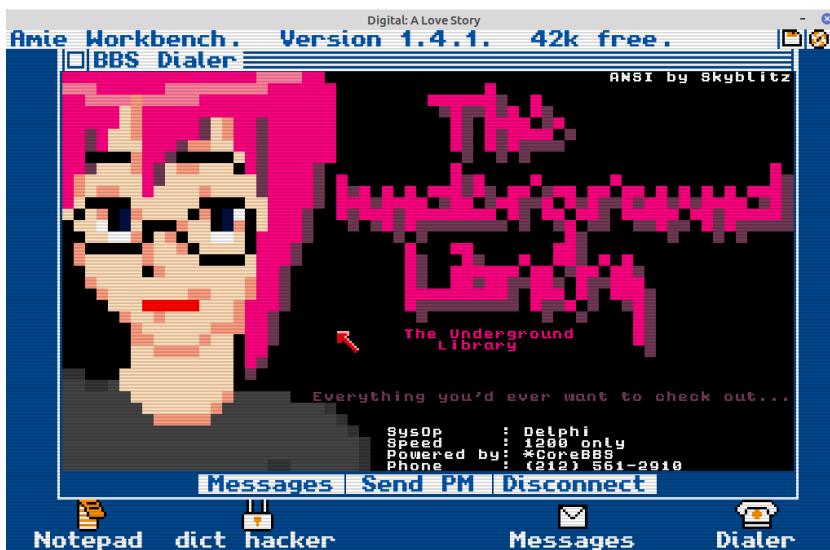


Figure 4.17: Screenshot from *Digital: A Love Story* (Love Conquers All Games, 2010), where
Christine Love's authorial signature is seen.

Love started her professional career with *Digital: A Love Story*, which became pivotal in
her artistic output. Love created *Digital* while coping with depression, just like Zoë Quinn
while writing *Depression Quest*. Before *Digital* was released, Love even felt her project would
"probably get… about a dozen or so people; less, because it was kind of a crazy idea about
an obscure part of computing history."[249] Instead, *Digital* received recognition in the media,
including an honorable mention among *Gamasutra*'s best indie games of 2010[250] and *PC*

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248  Cf. ibid.
249  Christine Love, "What Kind of Year Has It Been?" (Love on Love, January 4, 2011), https://bit.ly/41SZdDW.
250  Mike Rose and Tim W., "Gamasutra's Best of 2010: Top 10 Indie Games" (Gamasutra, December 17, 2010),
     https://bit.ly/41TYnXx.

*Gamer*'s top free games on personal computers the same year.[251]  Moreover, *Digital* was featured in the scholarly *Digital Journal* alongside such titles as *Dys4ia* and *Portal*.[252]

*Digital* shares many similarities with Chine Lanzmann and Jean-Louis Le Breton's *La Femme qui ne supportait pas les ordinateurs*. Both games take place in the 1980s when the hacking ethos rose [M5]; *Digital*'s action occurs in an alternative history, five minutes after 1988 [N1]. Also, both titles deeply reflect the past realities of navigating the Internet before the World Wide Web became standard [S4]. While *Femme* takes place in a discussion group called Calvados, *Digital* simulates the bulletin board systems (BBS), popular in North America during the 1970s and 1980s.[253] [M5] Moreover, with a point-and-click interface [S1], Love's game imitates the Amiga Workbench operating system (signed "Amie Workbench"). Finally, what interests both Lanzmann and Love is blurring gender boundaries via communication with computer programs.

*Digital* begins when the player receives a message from George Wong, a dialing operator who sends a seven-number password to a safe local BBS. After gaining access to the BBS, the user learns in a discussion group that some "third-generation" artificial intelligence bots (marked with asterisks) have been terminated while operating on human-dominated servers. One of those bots, named *Emilia, has somehow survived, and the player's goal is to find her. However, *Emilia thrives on the other, forbidden server. To see her, one must send messages to other forum members, who supply the player with illegal codes, cracking programs, and even numbers to different protected BBS [N1].

What stands out in *Digital* is the innovative way of handling conversations. Players cannot see what they send or how they manipulate the dialogue tree [N4]. The player, while sending messages (simply by clicking "Send" or "Reply"), may only see what the other internet users have sent back. Thus, the game creates understatements, making the player never learn whether her avatar is a man or a woman [N3]. However, the player's identity is not crucial to fully experiencing *Digital* and building a strong emotional relationship with *Emilia. When the player finds *Emilia on a server belonging to the University of California in Santa Barbara, this female AI, grateful for being liberated by the player, starts a conversation and gradually confesses her love to the player. Unfortunately, another AI named *Reaper (created for the

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251  Lewis Denby, "20 Free PC Games You Must Play," *PC Gamer*, May 3, 2011, https://bit.ly/3t2KfMe.

252  Linzi Juliano, "Digital: A Love Story; Bully; Grand Theft Auto IV; Portal; Dys4ia (Review)," *Theatre Journal* 64, no. 4 (2012): 596, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/494453.

253  The bulletin board systems published announcements, messages, and discussions dedicated to their users. See Sheizaf Rafaeli, "The Electronic Bulletin Board: A Computer-Driven Mass Medium," *Social Science Micro Review* 2, no. 3 (1984): 123–36, https://doi.org/10.1177/089443938600200302.

PDP-10 systems) destroys various BBS; to destroy \*Reaper and finish the game, the player needs to sacrifice \*Emilia [L2, L4].

Besides the main thread (the emotional development between the player and \*Emilia), the player can explore the discussions that reflect the toxic masculinity of the 1980s. One of the found threads includes an argument ignited by a far-right user, Rainbreeze: "America's lost it, our day in the limelight has passed… It's inevitable, the future belongs to the land of the rising sun: porn cartoons, bullet trains, samurai, and all that shit" [S2]. Other users quickly ridicule this statement; for example, Poseidon writes: "This is the sort of thing a 12-year-old would write" [S2]. However, the discussion can be easily put into the present context. One can still find posts as Rainbreeze's on forums like Reddit or 4chan, known for their toxic content.[254] Using the imaginary past as a setting, Christine Love tells us much about the events preceding GamerGate.

Moreover, Love's presence as an autrice pervades the game. When the player gets to the Underground Library, Love's pixelized image is displayed in glasses with pink hair (Figure 4.17) [S1]. Also, the autrice announces other games constituting her universe. For example, J. Rook, one of the BBS users, will return as a playable personality in *don't take it personally, babe, it just ain't your story*. Additionally, the method of searching digital documents will appear in a game whose title is an antonym of *Digital*: *Analogue: A Hate Story*.

### 4.4.4 *Love and Order* (2011)

However, Love contributed a scenario for a commissioned *Love and Order* before those two projects. Its lead designer was Riva Celso, with whom Love collaborated on writing and dialogues. *Love and Order* (a playful pun on the 1990 TV series *Law & Order*) is a dating simulator inscried in Japanese visual novels' poetics. While Love considered this game inferior to her other projects,[255] it remains an exciting simulation of balancing work and private life.

The game's main character is Dana Larose, a new secretary in Montreal's Crown Attorney's office [N1]. Larose, welcomed by her boss Jonathan, must meet other employees: Pierre, Ross, and Dorothy. Each of the four characters may be Larose's love interest over time [L2]. Nonetheless, most of the game time is filled with repetitive tasks ordered by Larose's co-workers, such as stamping, copying, and filing documents [L2]. Each activity takes part of

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254    Diana Rieger et al., "Assessing the Extent and Types of Hate Speech in Fringe Communities. A Case Study of Alt-Right Communities on 8chan, 4chan, and Reddit," *Social Media + Society*, October 20, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211052906.
255    Love, "What Kind of Year Has It Been?"

a day and raises the stress rate, negatively affecting job performance [L3].  Therefore, the player must spread their work out over days and avoid taking responsibility for unnecessary tasks, as not completing them harms relations with other associates [S4]. Meanwhile, efficient collaboration with one or two colleagues raises their trust in the avatar, which may even lead to dating her after work; moreover, finding a date is necessary to resolve the main thread and thus finish the game [L4].

The primary objective reveals itself in the early stage of the game.  Upon checking one of the documents, Larose finds files that guide her to an unresolved lawsuit involving the mysterious vanishing of the former secretary in the Crown Attorney's office [N1].  However, Larose needs to conduct an investigation alone due to her duties. Dana can get additional documents from her closest colleague or love interest only when the game advances significantly [L3].

Ultimately, *Love and Order* is a minor piece in Love's oeuvre.  Dialogues appear repetitive, and compared with *Digital*'s bold narrative, the emerging plot concludes unimaginatively; after delivering the abandoned crime documentation to the police, the game ends with Larose marrying her love interest [N4].  Still, LGBTQIA* issues can occur even here; Larose may engage in a relationship with Dorothy, the only female non-playable character within the office.[256]  Above all, *Love and Order* is about managing time and attention devoted to workmates, which is crucial for job success [S4].

### 4.4.5  *Don't take it personally, babe, it just ain't your story* (2011)

*Don't take it personally, babe, it just ain't your story* was freely distributed after Love's one-month work in April 2011.  The game quickly sparked a debate over social media platforms' influence on individuals.  For example, Alec Meer from *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* praised the game's bravery in depicting moral dilemmas faced during the game: "Despite the cutesy presentation, *Don't Take It Personally* doesn't pull many punches. It doesn't shy from discomfort, it doesn't shy from lurid language and most of all it's capable of being profoundly sinister."[257]  Richard Clark from the *Kill Screen* magazine similarly commented on the game's dilemmas, referring to the title: "I'm not a teacher. I'm not trying to get a classroom of students to feel comfortable

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256    See also "Dorothy Mccoy in Love & Order," in *LGBTQ Game Archive* (LGBTQ Video Game Archive, February 12, 2017), https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/2017/02/12/dorothy-mccoy-in-love-order/.

257    Alec Meer, "Wot I Think: Don't Take It Personally..." (Rock Paper Shotgun, April 6, 2011), https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/dont-take-it-personally-review.
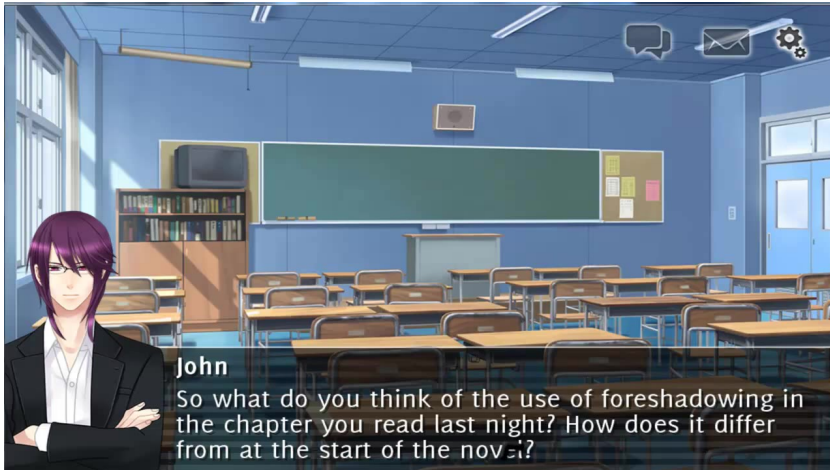
Figure 4.18: Screenshot from *Don't take it personally, babe, it just ain't your story* (Love Conquers All Games, 2011), with the player character similar in appearance to Christine Love.
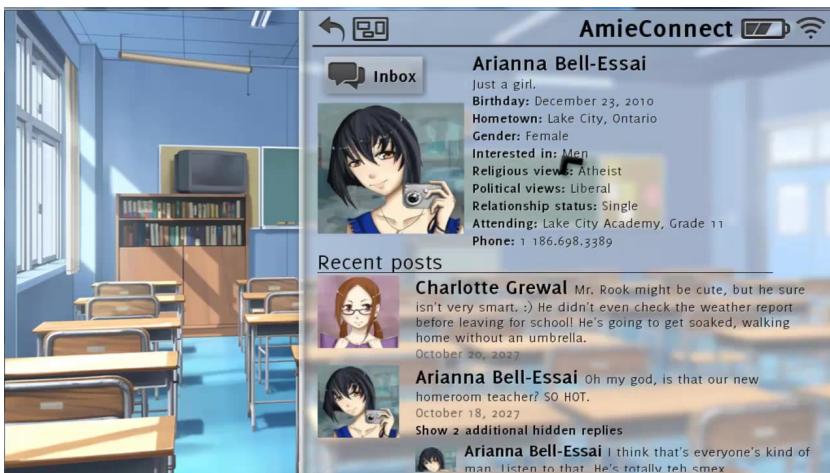


Figure 4.19: Screenshot from *Don't take it personally, babe, it just ain't your story* (Love Conquers All Games, 2011), depicting Rook's software to spy on students.

with me, and also make good grades. But I took this game personally."[258] Still, *Don't take it personally*'s title is meaningful. Firstly, it refers to the game's late part when the player learns the game's meaning with distance [S4]. However, the phrase "it just ain't your story" also stresses that the player's agency, seemingly meaningful even in visual novels, is restricted here.

*Don't take it personally* features John Rook (a minor character in *Digital*), a male teacher who nevertheless resembles Christine Love due to the same pink hair and glasses (Figure 4.18) [N2]. Rook, a teacher who divorced twice, arrives in Japan, where a multi-national class needs to be taught [N1]. Rook has access to a Facebook-like social media platform, AmieConnect, where he can read students' profiles and private messages without being seen (Figure 4.19) [L2]. Thus, the game presents a panoptic teaching model. Based on Jeremy Bentham's project of the prison called Panopticon, Michel Foucault demonstrated that in modern democratic societies, the power over the people is invisible and unverifiable [S3]. The observed person may never see the observer (the ruling power), but they should be sure they are constantly observed.[259]

Following Foucault's statement, *Don't take it personally* initially gives the player power over Rook's students [L5]. However, such power requires responsibility. As the plot unfolds, the player learns that Rook's students struggle with their worldviews and sexuality [N3].

1. Arianna Bell-Essai tries to seduce Rook [sic!].

2. Charlotte Grewal identifies as a lesbian (her ex-girlfriend is Kendall Flowers, a tomboy). Despite her "tool" status among classmates, she is casual and sincere in her internet chats.

3. A mischievous girl Taylor Gibson, who recently broke her relationship with Nolan Striukas, arranges a plot against Akira Yamazaki, a classmate who comes out as gay.

4. The shyest student in the classroom, Isabella Hart, reportedly committed suicide during the first semester.

Like in other visual novels, *Don't take it personally* allows the player to choose at certain moments among two options [L5], which affects Rook's stance towards particular students. For example, Rook can date Arianna or refuse her. The first option has severe consequences—as Arianna may force Rook into sex; the second option breaks Arianna down and makes her not

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258   Richard Clark, "Review: Don't Take It Personally Babe, It Just Ain't Your Story" (Kill Screen, March 4, 2012), https://killscreen.com/previously/articles/review-dont-take-it-personally-babe-it-just-aint-your-story/.

259   Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1975; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 201.

appear in class for a long time [L2]. Another choice affects Nolan's relationship with Akira. Fearful of gay sex, Nolan comes to Rook's office to say that Akira invited him on a date. Then, the player can convince Nolan that gay relationships are not equivalent to sex; this choice makes Nolan temporarily safely go out with Akira but enrages Taylor and causes her to abuse Akira [N4]. There are more choices that the player can make, but they ultimately lead to Rook feeling increasingly inept, apprehensive, and guilty of his attitude towards his students: "I'm a creep, and a shitty teacher. I let completely invading my students' privacy become banal to me…" [S2]

Moreover, the final part of *Don't take it personally* even strips Rook of his illusion that he had power over his students [L3]. It turns out that they pranked Rook; Isabella comes alive for the classes, and Akira with Kendall do a final theatrical project that strikingly alludes to all choices the player had made [L4, N5]. However, Akira's mother then explains to Rook that privacy in Japan does not exist; hence, students knew from the beginning that they were observed [L4]. As Foucault would stress, Rook's social media platform "has become a transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole."[260] Ultimately, the teacher's authority in the wake of social media does not exist, and Rook becomes—as his name expresses—a "rookie," a socially awkward person [S4]. The game's title contains a playful phrase: "it just ain't your story." Indeed, the agency that Rook and the player thought they had was an illusion [L5].

Due to addressing various manifestations of teenagers' sexuality and stylizing an avatar upon her appearance, Love returned to the topics prevalent in her oeuvre. Her reflections on technology and sexuality will return in *Analogue: A Hate Story*, a title provocatively reversing *Digital: A Love Story* but coming to similar conclusions.

### 4.4.6 *Analogue: A Hate Story* (2012)

In 2012, Love wrote *Analogue* with the Ren'Py game engine, dedicated to visual novels [M3]. Unfortunately, the development took a half-year, requiring Love to drop out of university halfway through development. However, thanks to *Analogue*, Love could "live off the sales of a super niche crazy feminist visual novel."[261] *Analogue* became a moderate critical success; while Phill Cameron from the *Eurogamer* website expressed disenchantment with the game

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260   Ibid., 207.
261   Cf. Cassandra Khaw, "Interview: Christine Love on Creating Inclusive Games" (1UP.com, October 19, 2012), https://bit.ly/43ckTfl.
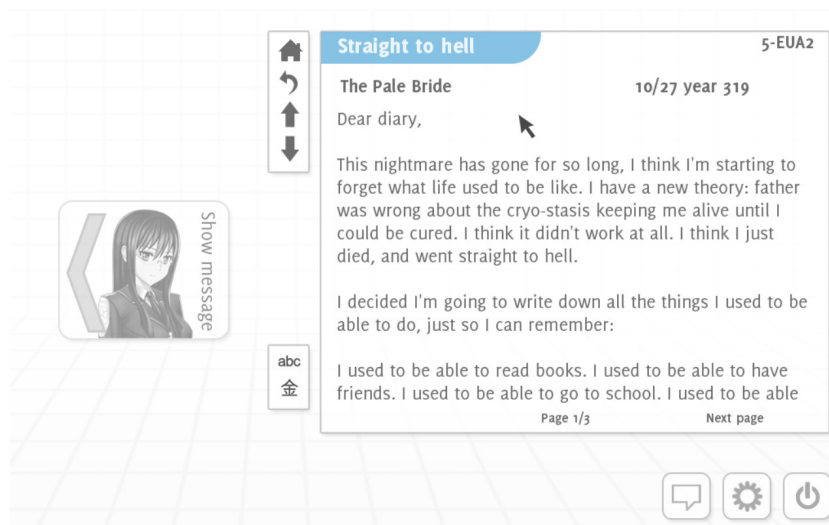
Figure 4.20: Screenshot from *Analogue: A Hate Story* (Love Conquers All Games, 2012), with a diary by *Hyun-ae; on the left, *Hyun-ae's AI persona.

interface and ending, he admitted that "writing is more than compelling" and indicated its ideological ambiguity:

> The interesting thing is quite how violently what you've already read is being contradicted. In the end you're forced to choose who you believe, and to be fair to Love, both sides have a certain appeal.[262]

In 2013, Love released an extended version of *Analogue* called *Hate Plus*. *Hate Plus* allows the player to load records of finished gameplay from *Analogue* and continue its story. *Hate Plus* also extends the player's possible choices, even though it is "less of an epic and more of a sexed-up frolic through the ideas and characters presented by the previous game", as Cara Ellison wrote.[263]  Hence, I will focus on *Analogue*, due to a better articulated intersectional message.

*Analogue*, unlike *Digital*, takes place in the far future and theoretically resembles science fiction games [N1]. The player's task as an intergalactic historian is to discover what happened to the starship *Mugunghwa* which was intended to establish the first interstellar human colony [L1].  Upon entering the ship (as it turns out, the abandoned one), the player may use the terminal to contact an artificial intelligence [L2]. The AI takes the form of two rivaling women,

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262   Phill Cameron, "Analogue: A Hate Story Review" (Eurogamer, April 6, 2012), https://bit.ly/45jiotr.
263   Cara Ellison, "Hate Plus Review" (Eurogamer, September 9, 2013), https://bit.ly/3pZzn3Z.

who cannot see or hear the player; instead, they react to dialogue options selected by the player [L2, N2]. The women are *Hyun-ae and *Mute, who supply the player with contradicting digital documents of the *Mugunghwa*'s court (Figure 4.20).

However, the documents themselves are not entirely fictional. As Alec Meer from the *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* website noted, "*Analogue*'s gradually-revealed backstory is based upon Korea's five centuries-long Joseon Dynasty, and particularly its shocking oppression of women"[264] [S3]. Moreover, the game constitutes "an acutely close-up look at a society that believed men are born to rule and women are born to obey."[265] Both AIs represent different views on females' societal roles [N3]. *Hyun-ae supplies the player with files documenting the fate of the so-called Pale Bride ("pale" for her skin color). As the letters demonstrate, the Pale Bride—a girl from the liberal past, put into stasis because of her severe disease and awakened in the future—was shocked by finding herself in a misogynistic society where "men are honoured, women are abased" [S2]. The Pale Bride was then forcibly prepared to marry the *Mugunghwa*'s Emperor Ryu In-ho and experienced a culture shock. Her rebellious behavior in new circumstances met with the outrage of the Emperor's court. The player learns that *Huyn-ae is the AI version of the Pale Bride herself by the time [N3].

Here, one might wonder how the game fits into the queer culture inherent in Love's oeuvre. However, some logs in the game confirm that *Analogue* contains a queer reading. For example, one may cite the accounts of the Pale Bride's youthful behavior in the Emperor's court. A log from the noble Kim Yeong-seok's wife who raised the Pale Bride says: "She is in trouble so often, one would think she were a boy. She acts like one, too! I suppose it can't be helped" [S2]. Thus, the Pale Bride did not fit into the heteronormative society that expects females to be polite and submissive to males [N3].

This interpretation, supported by *Hyun-ae, conflicts with *Mute's relation. One of the logs that *Huyn-ae mistakenly shows to the player may raise doubts. *Mute here criticizes *Huyn-ae's nursing father, Smith Kyung-sam, for hiding the "truth" about the Pale Bride: "The girl is just too perfect. She's young, she's beautiful… she commands all the attention of the emperor. Like, can you blame him?" [S2] When the player chooses the interaction with *Mute in the terminal, the new AI further extends her accusations of the Pale Bride, naming her a "crazy murderous bitch" [N2]. *Mute accuses *Hyun-ae directly of murdering the whole ship crew, including *Mute's beloved man Sang-jung [N3]. Nevertheless, *Mute also hides the

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truth. *Hyun-ae's mass murder was an act of desperate revenge because she had her tongue cut for insubordination, and *Mute, among the ship crew leaders, had been involved in such a violent act. Moreover, *Mute—probably raised in subordination towards men—avoids blaming males for the oppressive patriarchal system and becomes its explainer and supporter instead [N3]. For example, while the log unveiled by *Hyun-ae contains the phrase "men are honoured, women are abased", *Mute claims it simply translates into "male superiority" [S2].

Thus, one can see two contradicting views on females' liberty, notably shared by both females: the liberal and the reactionary. The player's decisions affect one of five possible endings [L4], yet the story is more important than its conclusion. Christine Love inscribed her game in the intense clash between progressive activists and GamerGate reactionaries when females trying to transmute the digital game scene met the same reaction as *Hyun-ae. Although the player can stand on both sides (or support neither of them), Love's compassion for *Hyun-ae is evident [S4]. In one interview, Love ultimately criticized misogyny, yet she expressed the complex, intersectional character of the oppression against females—the oppression in which females sometimes participate:

> I don't want to make it just an evil mustache-twirling man who wants to oppress women. That's not how patriarchy works; it's much more insidious than that… Really, I think the recurring theme of *Analogue* is that the worst misogynists are always women, because that's the greatest trick patriarchy can play, is convincing us to self-perpetuate our own oppression.[266]

Ambiguous relations between females and patriarchy are *Analogue*'s key themes. However, *Analogue* can also be interpreted as a posthumanist work [S3]. Posthumanist thought assumes that borders between humans and objects/machines are constantly blurred—for example, due to constantly developing artificial intelligence.[267] In *Analogue*, the digital terminal manned by AI versions of *Hyun-ae and *Mute is the only object lasting after the ship's inhabitants. Therefore, the player interacts with living beings' surrogates—or ghosts. As Justyna Janik says, "ghosts are not connected so much with events that merely happened in the past as with very

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[266] Cf. Nich Maragos, "Love Week: Christine Love Interview" (Gaming Intelligence Agency, September 12, 2013), http://www.thegia.com/2013/09/12/love-week-christine-love-interview/.

[267] Jay David Bolter, "Posthumanism," in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*, ed. Klaus Bruhn Jensen (John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 1–8, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118766 804.wbiect220; Francesca Ferrando, "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations," *Existenz* 8, no. 2 (2013): 28–29, https://www.existenz.us/vo lumes/Vol.8-2Ferrando.pdf.

private emotions for those who see them."[268] Moreover, like flawed human beings, ghosts "can lie" and express complex emotions.[269] The player can easily lie to them, too, as pIan Bryce Jones proves during the analysis of *Hate Plus*.[270]

Nevertheless, the player's lie may help her build *Hyun-ae or *Mute's trust and compassion in the user in certain situations. For example, one can invent facts about the future Earth. Then, when asked by *Hyun-ae whether Earth is still beautiful and human colonies on other planets exist, the player can agree—to her enthusiasm [L2, N3].

Returning to Janik's words, one can even say that ghosts can occupy specific political positions and influence those who meet them[271]. The AI versions of the two females are ideologically biased; they show only logs that present them in a good light. Rob Gallagher underlines that *Analogue* "skewers progressive complacency, insisting that access to an exhaustive digital archive won't, in its own right, prevent regression, factionalism, and cultural amnesia."[272] Indeed, Love's game design anticipated what happened politically in Western countries despite the emergence of digital archives.

### 4.4.7  *Ladykiller in a Bind* (2016)

After developing *Analogue*, Love embarked on her most daring project yet. In *Ladykiller in a Bind*, she explored BDSM themes, which involve erotic practices such as bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, sadomasochism, and many others. These topics easily fit into the developing queer game avant-garde. However, *Ladykiller in a Bind* sparked controversy

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[268]  Justyna Janik, "Ghosts of the Present Past: Spectrality in the Video Game Object," *Journal of the Philosophy of Games* 1 (2019): 3, https://journals.uio.no/JPG/article/view/2943/6902.

[269]  Ibid.

[270]  Ian Bryce Jones, "Do(n't) Hold Your Breath: Rules, Trust, and the Human at the Keyboard," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 16, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 169–71, https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2018.1444 460.

[271]  Janik mentions Jacques Derrida's studies on hauntology, that is, the spectral presence of philosophers who died and their political ideas that become rediscovered by future generations. Derrida states in *Spectres de Marx* that Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* resonated in the Western European thought only since the early 1950s. Since that period, multiplied re-readings reinvigorated formerly forgotten, original Marxist texts. "Tout cela a commencé – tout cela était même déjà vu, indubitablement, dès le début des années 1950. Dès lors la question qui nous réunit ce soir (*whither marxism* ?) résonne comme une vieille répétition. Ce fut déjà, mais tout autrement, celle qui s'imposait à beaucoup des jeunes gens que nous étions à cette époque". Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx. L'état de La Dette, Le Travail Du Deuil Et La Nouvelle Internationale* (1993; repr., Paris: Éditions Galilée; Éditions Galilée, 2013), p. 37.

[272]  Rob Gallagher, "Volatile Memories: Personal Data and Post Human Subjectivity in the Aspern Papers, Analogue: A Hate Story and Tacoma," *Games and Culture* 15, no. 7 (2020): 764–65, https://doi.org/10.117 7/1555412019841477.

Figure 4.21: Screenshot from *Ladykiller in a Bind* (Love Conquers All Games, 2016), where Beast asks the player to choose if they want to know explicit details of the story.



Figure 4.22: Screenshot from *Ladykiller in a Bind* (Love Conquers All Games, 2016), where Beauty engages in a sadomasochistic relationship with Beast.

even among the liberal gaming audience. The issue was with an unskippable rape scene in the middle of the game. For example, Kate Gray from *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* blamed Love for misunderstanding the essence of BDSM:

> I think I'd rather not have a rape scene at all – especially not one in which the character, who is a lesbian being forced into unwanted heterosexual sex acts, says that she *enjoys* it. There is a difference between BDSM, which is caring, two-way and consensual, and being forced into something. To blur the lines is irresponsible and damaging.[273]

Heavy criticism of Love's game also concerned its limited potential for political critique. According to *Polygon*'s Allegra Frank,

> it is irksome that a game so open-minded about sex and gender rarely touched on the classism – and racism – inherent within this system… there's just one person of color in the cast… and she's the maid.[274]

Under criticism, Love released a patch that censored the most controversial scenes. However, as *Polygon*'s Simone de Rochefort and merritt k remarked, the exaggerated criticism of *Ladykiller in a Bind* was unnecessary and harmful to the gaming industry. Rochefort and merritt k noted that while "larger studios are lauded for baby steps in matters of representation", independent authors such as Love "are set upon for imperfect stories that actually hew closer to the realities of their audiences' lives."[275]

Indeed, the negative reaction to *Ladykiller in a Bind* demonstrated the oversensitivity of critics, especially since it is still hard to find a game where BDSM themes are treated with more understanding. Moreover, Love's game is reminiscent of its conceit and premise of *Fascination* by Muriel Tramis. Like Doralice in Tramis's game, the Beast's playable character becomes embroiled in a dangerous yet perversely fascinating rivalry [M5]. The beginning of *Ladykiller in a Bind* may sound disturbing. The player sees the Beast bound by her older brother, the Prince, who looks almost identical to her [N1]. During their conversation, the player learns that

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[273] Kate Gray, "Wot I Think: Ladykiller in a Bind" (Rock, Paper, Shotgun, January 17, 2017), https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/ladykiller-in-a-bind-review.

[274] Allegra Frank, "Ladykiller in a Bind Review" (Polygon, October 20, 2016), https://www.polygon.com/2016/10/20/13339742/ladykiller-in-a-bind-review.

[275] Simone de Rochefort and merritt k, "Ladykiller in a Bind Shows That We're Not Ready to Handle Messy Queer Stories" (Polygon, January 24, 2017), https://www.polygon.com/2017/1/24/14365716/ladykiller-in-a-bind-problematic-consent-sex-scene.

the Prince, belonging to a private school called Elaborate University High, agreed to help her sister keep the bicycle confiscated by her father. Under one circumstance: the Beast needed to disguise herself as the Prince, survive one week during a ship cruise, and win a popularity contest in his place [N1]. Intriguingly, the Beast identifies as a lesbian, so she has several opportunities to romance numerous women (or at least those who identified themselves as women) [N2, N3]. Even more intriguing, the Beast tells the Prince about her relationships.

However, I would argue that the player's perspective is not the Beast's point of view, but the Prince's. The Prince begins by saying: "Now, I'm going to need you to walk me through everything that happened. If we're going to get our stories straight, I'm going to need all the details" [S2]. This perspective corresponds to the player who, as with visual novels, demands spicy erotic content. Later on, the Beast refers to the beginning of the game, asking the Prince (Figure 4.21):

> Do you want me to give you an opportunity to skip out of me describing getting laid? … Well? Do you want the option of skip it? I'll leave it at the top of the screen during each sex scene if you say yes [S2].

The Beast thus speaks simultaneously to the Prince and the players themselves. Meanwhile, the game interface offers the option to choose between including or excluding erotic scenes, a conscious reference to the specific purpose of a visual novel, namely to satisfy the erotic needs of the user [M5]. Moreover, the player is repeatedly positioned as a perverse observer of the events. Finally, the player's convenience as the game's distanced participant is emphasized by the ability to rewind time and change the choices made [L5]. Thus, the player is encouraged to experiment with influencing the protagonist's fate [L5, N5].

*Ladykiller in a Bind* is Love's most intersectional game. During play, the Beast may encounter numerous non-binary persons, including [N2, N3]:

- the Beauty (a bisexual, planning to marry the game's male Black character The President, which can be altered during play);

- the Photographer (a lesbian and an Instagram celebrity but also potentially the most dangerous person on the ship);

- the Swimmer (an intersexual person, once dumped by the Prince);

- the Boy (a cross-dressing boy who feels like a girl);

- the Nerd (an asexual girl with no social skills),

- the Stalker (a shy queer girl and a fan of digital games).

The Beast may form a relationship with only a few of them. During the seven days on the ship, she may choose from several routes leading to sex with them (except for the Nerd, who consistently refuses to participate in the relationship). The game gradually unveils possible reactions to the questions during numerous conversations with other characters [N4]. Because unlocking subsequent reactions requires delaying a quick response, the player needs patience [S4]; even when some options disappear over time, the player can easily rewind the game progress to choose one of them (Figure 4.22) [L2, L5]. Still, the choices made do matter. Depending on the answers, the Beast may win or lose the votes required to win the contest during the ship cruise; the Beast may also raise suspicion that she is not the Prince himself [L2]. Thus, the game requires caution in establishing relationships.

Reducing the suspicion index can only occur with the Beauty, who requires the Beast in exchange for taking a passive position in the BDSM relationship [L1, N3]. Especially choosing the Beauty's trait becomes a lesson in humility for the Beast, especially if the player had been too goal-oriented to win the popularity contest. Submission to the Beauty's wishes (including stripping naked and being strangled) results in the Beast's feelings of being "objectified" [S2]. If the Beast chooses to say that the strangulation makes their relationship "unfeminist," the Beauty responds with the following words [S2]:

> Unfeminist would be a series of oppressive social structures enforcing conventional beauty norms. This is just me, the woman you've agreed to obey the orders of in a pre-negotiated relationship, telling you to do something for her own amusement.

Perhaps that would be Love's programmed, far-sighted response to the accusations posed by other feminists. Love suggests that a feminist game does not merely consist of object-subject gazes, as Laura Mulvey once claimed. Feminism is much more complicated in depicting power relations [S3]. Here I come to the most controversial game scene when the President rapes the Beast and demands her favor points for making her bike redelivered. The Beast says that she *enjoyed* the rape, which may raise just concerns about whether the game undermines the accomplishments of feminism [N4]. Still, the game underlines that the Beast constantly acts under male pressure; these are still the men (the Prince, the President, and the Beast's father) who subordinate the female protagonist for their egotistical purposes. Such subordination may

conflict with much healthier BDSM relationships with other characters, where everyone knows what they can do.

Due to the fluidity of the game characters' sexual identities and relationships, the constant threat of the Beast's fate, and the necessity to be cautious when choosing dialogue lines, it is easy to fail the game. Following Bonnie Ruberg's understanding of queer failure,[276] one can stress that *Ladykiller in a Bind* underlines the meaning of failure as an unavoidable part of playing. Ruberg says, "Just as video games expand definitions of queerness to account for play, queerness destabilizes the very ontologies of video games."[277] In *Ladykiller in a Bind*, Love confuses the players and makes them feel guilty for making every meaningful but inappropriate decision; acting blindly in the destabilized micro-world is pivotal for this queer digital game [S4].

### 4.4.8 *Get in the Car, Loser!* (2021)
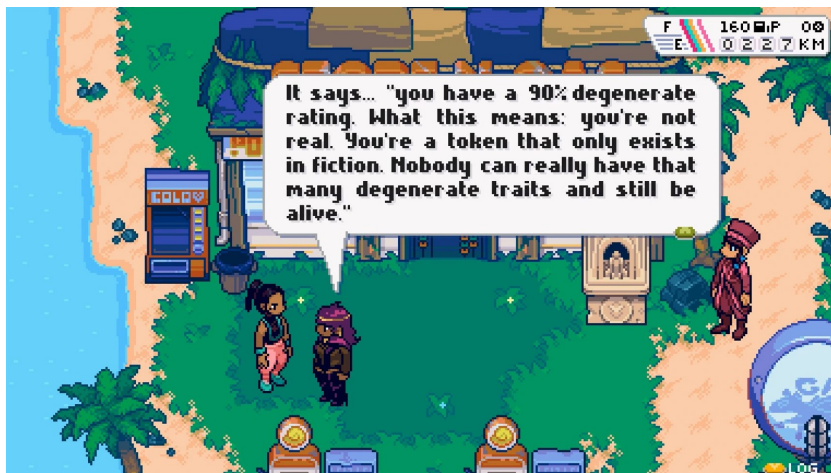


Figure 4.23: Screenshot from *Get in the Car, Loser!* (2021), mentioning the transphobic social media app.

Having completed the development of *Ladykiller in a Bind*, Christine Love began experimenting with combining visual novels and role-playing games. However, before the new project, *Get In The Car, Loser!* could be completed, Love collaborated with a six-person team. While Love focused on writing, Isaac Safron Robin was responsible for concept art and character

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276    Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*.

277    Bonnie Ruberg, "Queerness and Video Games: Queer Game Studies and New Perspectives Through Play," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 24, no. 4 (2018): 547, muse.jhu.edu/article/706702.

Figure 4.24: Screenshot from *Get in the Car, Loser!* (2021), depicting the jRPG-style combat.

design. August Cartland, Tom Waterhouse, and Mike Tona devised the visual style and pixel art animations. Finally, Christa Lee and Jami Lynne composed the soundtrack and songs.[278] Nevertheless, Love still considered *Get In The Car* her personal work, originating from her road trip to the United States [S3]:

> The best road trip I've ever been on in my life was visiting the west coast of the United States, and we stopped by some random tiny town on a whim just to visit the beach… but it was with a girl I love very dearly, so of course seeing that ocean was the most beautiful thing I've seen in my life, how could it not be?[279]

Love also claimed in one interview[280] that she was also inspired by Bryan Lee O'Malley's coming-of-age graphic novel *Lost At Sea*,[281] as well as by Japanese renowned role-playing games such as *Drakengard*,[282] *Final Fantasy XIII*,[283] and *Nier*.[284] However, the game's intersectional approach (playable characters of different color skins and sexual identities), urban

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[278] Cf. Zack Welhouse, "Get in the Car, Loser! Interview" (RPGamer, October 9, 2021), https://rpgamer.com/2021/10/get-in-the-car-loser-interview/.

[279] Cf. ibid.

[280] Isaiah Colbert, "Behind the Scenes of the Fall's Gayest RPG" (Kotaku, October 7, 2021), https://kotaku.com/behind-the-scenes-of-the-falls-gayest-rpg-1847821965.

[281] Bryan Lee O'Malley, *Lost at Sea* (2004; repr., Portland, OR: Oni Press, 2014).

[282] Cavia and Square Enix, *Drakengard*, version PlayStation 2 (Japan: Square Enix, 2003).

[283] Square Enix, *Final Fantasy XIII*, version PlayStation 3 (Japan: Sony Computer Entertainment, 2009).

[284] Cavia, *Nier*, version PlayStation 3 (Japan: Square Enix, 2010).

fantasy settings, and visual style resemble the TV series *Steven Universe*.[285] Moreover, as one reviewer said, the "tongue-in-cheek" writing is lucid, mainly for the millennial audience, with numerous acts of breaking the fourth wall.[286]

In fact, *Get In The Car* mixes intersectionality and intertextuality with elements of deconstruction. It follows the story of Sam Anon, a goth, dark-skinned woman, as she embarks on a road trip across the United States with her former lesbian girlfriend, Grace Morningstar, and Grace's current bisexual partner, Valentin Vaillante. [N1]. The three attendees of the local Academy of Order unite to fight the cultists who support the emerging Machine Devil [N2, N3].

The game employs urban fantasy imagery as a vehicle to convey a political message. While the Divine Order behind the Academy fears battling the Devil, Sam, Grace, and Valentin are more radical and determined to combat white supremacists whose movement rapidly increased in the 2010s [N1, S3]. They state that fighting right-wing groups is more important than speaking from a safe academic position, which has been infiltrated by the right [S2]:

> **Grace**: Well, it's been a thousand years since the Machine Devil was sealed away… so now he's reemerging.
>
> **Sam**: I guess that's what those creepy armband guys at the Academy keep saying. I feel like I've been seeing more and more of them… it's pretty scary.
>
> …
>
> **Valentin**: Like, you drive out of town and you're bound to get attacked by one of these fucked up machines, like, every other minute. Probably only a matter of time before that's true even in Academy Town. Like, man. First the library riots, now these manifestation… it's gonna kill so many people.
>
> …
>
> **Grace**: …the world is falling into chaos while the Divine Order does absolutely nothing to seal away the re-emerging Machine Devil.

As Sam, Grace, and Valentin traverse the highways, they may engage in direct battles with the cultists (Figure 4.24), gather fuel and supplies in nearby towns, or continue driving to avoid

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285  Rebecca Sugar, *Steven Universe*, TV (United States: Cartoon Network, 2013–2019); see Jess Rowan Marcotte, "Get in the Car, Loser!" (Made Nous, March 4, 2022), https://made-nous.ca/made-recommends/get-in-the-car-loser/.

286  Bridget Emily, "Get in the Car, Loser!: A Fun Queer RPG – PC Review" (The Game Crater, October 16, 2021), https://www.thegamecrater.com/get-in-the-car-loser-a-fun-queer-rpg-pc-review/.

some draining battles [L2]. The battles themselves are turn-based and inspired by Japanese role-playing games (jRPG). Each player character has health points, and players must plan which character to attack the enemy units or which character to heal [L1].

The majority of gameplay in *Get In The Car* involves reading elaborate dialogues between Sam, a comically inexperienced drama queen and the game protagonist, and the Grace-Valentin couple. Like in Love's previous visual novels, players can choose from multiple dialogue trees, particularly when other characters ask Sam about her sexual preferences or beliefs. [L5]. These questions redefine Sam and players' attitudes towards their sexuality as Christine Love criticizes the algorithmic victimization of LGBTQ people.

While staying in one town, Sam meets an unknown female introduces her to a "Free Quiz Online" app. The app supposedly offers free car fuel, but demands sensitive information in exchange, for example: "What's your skin tone?", "Are you LGBTQ?", "Are you mentally ill or physically disabled?" The app is later revealed to be called "DegeneRATE," and Sam reads the quiz results: "You have a 90% degenerate rating. What this mean: you're not real. You're a token that only exists in fiction. Nobody can really have that many degenerate traits and still be alive" (Figure 4.23) [S2].

The app featured in *Get In The Car* can be associated with Facebook or similar invasive programs, but this comical scene becomes a parable of LGBTQ persecution worldwide. [S3]. The statement "You're a token that only exists in fiction" seems too close to some governments' claims that LGBTQ people are not "people" but "ideology."[287] Despite its comical content,[288] *Get in the Car* is about resistance against an oppressive heteronormative society and borrows from Susan Sontag's camp theory, similar to Muriel Tramis's *Lost in Time*. However, Love's game imbues its content with campiness, with a deliberate "bad taste" policy. The story, which cannot be taken literally, demonstrates that only those treated as evil by society are determined to fight against evil.

### 4.4.9  Christine Love as an Autrice

As the digital artisan who programmed most of her games, Christine Love may be considered an autrice. Several features emphasize her authorial status:

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[287]  Zosia Wanat, "Poland's LGBTQ Community in the Political Crosshairs" (Politico, June 19, 2020), https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-lgbtq-community-in-the-political-crosshairs-elections-duda/.

[288]  The dialogues in the game constantly wink to the player and game culture, with Grace instructing Sam to interact with the menu and equipment screens, as well as press buttons responsible for handling the interface, communicating an indirect message to the player [N4].

1. **Queer identity of characters**. Love's games often feature protagonists and non-player characters who do not conform to heteronormative norms. Examples include the player's avatar in *Digital*, John Rook in *Don't take it personally*, the majority of the cast in *Ladykiller in a Bind*, and Sam Anon in *Get in the Car, Loser!* These characters experience loss, guilt, and failure, consistent with Halberstam's theory of queer identity.

2. **Intersectional feminist content**. Love's games take players out of their comfort zones and force them to encounter characters persecuted for their sexuality or race, or both. However, Love demonstrates that feminism is not uniform and that some women defend patriarchy, as seen in *Analogue*.

3. **Orientalization**. Christine Love's games contain profound references to Japanese culture. They mostly embody visual novels (*Love and Order*, *Don't take it personally*, *Analogue*, *Ladykiller in a Bind*). Also, Japanese role-playing games (jRPGs) inspire Love (*Get in the Car, Loser!*). However, her games also allude to the toxic American *otaku* culture, mainly to discussion groups on the alt-right haven, 4Chan.

4. **Authorial signature**. Crucially for the auteur theory, Love frequently makes cameo appearances in her games, such as her portrait with glasses and pink hair in *Digital* and the striking similarity between John Rook's appearance in *Don't take it personally* and Love's. Even the titles of her early games playfully allude to her name.

## 4.5 Meg Jayanth: A Shy decision-maker

### 4.5.1 Context: India

At first glance, Meghan Jayanth's home country, India, may not appear to have much involvement with games. However, despite being an underdeveloped country in digital game production, India experienced its first instances of domestic electronic literature in the 2000s. The SMS novel *Cloak Room*[289] was distributed on mobile phones before smartphones, laying the foundation for future Indian digital culture.[290] Still, Indian software have traditionally focused on functionality, with limited interest in creating digital literature and games for humanistic purposes.[291] It was only in the 2010s that Indian designers began developing games based on

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[289] Ro Gue, *Cloak Room*, version Windows (India: 3825media, 2004).
[290] T Shanmugapriya and Nirmala Menon, "First and Second Waves of Indian Electronic Literature," *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* 42, no. 4 (2019): 64–65.
[291] Ibid., 69.

local social and historical contexts. For instance, *Missing: A Game for a Cause*,[292] written by Satyajit Chakraborty and Aniket Majumdar, is part of the public art project by Leena Kejriwal, addressing sexual repression in contemporary India. *Raji: An Ancient Epic*[293] takes inspiration from Hindu mythology and Indian cultural heritage.[294]

The need to create domestic games reflecting India's past and present arose for a specific reason: the appropriation of Indian history in numerous digital and non-digital works. Indian academic Souvik Mukherjee argues that the well-known British board game *Snakes and Ladders* borrowed heavily from the Indian game of life and *karma* called *Gyan Chaupar*. Initially a religious game teaching moral action during karmic journeys, *Gyan Chaupar* was transformed by British colonizers into the linear racing game known today.[295] Mukherjee highlights that colonial attempts often involve oversimplification, even in modern strategy games like *Age of Empires 3*, where the digital Indian population does not eat cows,[296] and the *Civilization* series, which contains a recurring programming joke. In the latter, Mahatma Gandhi, a spiritual leader of the peaceful resistance movement against British occupation, is ironically portrayed as the most aggressive in-game character, attacking players with nuclear weapons when included as a computer rival.[297]

Thus, Western digital games often perpetuate colonial stereotypes about India. However, not only the "Empire Plays Back," as Mukherjee's book *Videogames and Postcolonialism* suggests; can also challenge the Western domination within digital worlds. British-Indian designer Meg Jayanth, a champion of intersectionality in games, is at the forefront of the Rebellion.

### 4.5.2 Short Biography

In an interview with Polygon online magazine, Jayanth describes her background, alluding to intersectional thought:

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[292] Satyajit Chakraborty and Aniket Majumdar, *Missing: A Game for a Cause*, version Windows (India: Flying Robot Studios, 2016).

[293] Nodding Heads Games, *Raji: An Ancient Epic*, version Windows (India: Super.com, 2020).

[294] Xenia Zeiler and Souvik Mukherjee, "Video Game Development in India: A Cultural and Creative Industry Embracing Regional Cultural Heritage(s)," *Games and Culture* 17, no. 4 (2022): 518, https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211045143.

[295] Souvik Mukherjee, "Ereading Karma in Snakes and Ladders: Two South Asian Game Boards in the British Library Collections" (Asian and African studies blog, September 11, 2020), https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2020/09/ereading-karma-in-snakes-and-ladders-two-game-boards-in-the-british-library-collections.html.

[296] Indian population consists not only of Hindi worshippers but also Muslims; the latter religion does not forbid eating beef (Souvik Mukherjee, *Videogames and Postcolonialism* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 77–78, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-54822-7).

[297] Ibid., 79.

> As a writer in the games industry, I've been told – many times and in different ways – that intersectionality is alienating. That playing as someone who is brown, *and* a woman, *and* an immigrant *and* bisexual, is just "too much" for a player to grasp… But that brown, female, immigrant, bi character I described is just as realistic as the brown-haired cis male "everyman." It describes me, at least in part, and millions like me.[298]

Raised between Bangalore and London, Jayanth attended 12 different schools.[299] She said: "I'm so Indian I'm British, I'm so British I'm Indian."[300] She enjoyed playing games like *Civilization*, *Theme Park* and *Theme Hospital*, *SimCity*, and *Grand Theft Auto*.[301] However, these games' white imperialist perspective prompted her to critically examine digital culture's colonial roots. Over time, Jayanth came to view digital games as the epitome of "capitalist art"[302] and saw them as "dominated by the Anglo-American imagination."[303]

As the Indian-British game designer, attempted to decolonize the medium. In 2021, she reminded us that "we do not live in a postcolonial world," highlighting the need for change within the digital game industry.[304] Jayanth is also interested in "unexpected perspectives and unheard voices," advocating for more inclusive representation of females, queer individuals, and people of color.[305] According to the *80 Days* writer, immersion is achieved not through domination over non-player characters, but as a social experience: "We *want* to engage with NPCs that feel like real people."[306]

*Samsara*, a project initially developed by Jayanth in her spare time,[307] serves as a direct exploration of the roots of Anglo-American imperialism and an attempt to confront colonial stereotypes.

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[298] Meg Jayanth, "What Big Publishers Can Learn About Representation from Small Games" (Polygon, January 12, 2018), https://www.polygon.com/2018/1/12/16878196/butterfly-soup-best-games-2017-year-in-review.

[299] Nikita Sawant, "In Conversation with Video Game Writer Meg Jayanth" (femina.in, June 13, 2018), https://www.femina.in/achievers/in-conversation-with-meg-jayanth-93105.html.

[300] Meg Jayanth, "White Protagonism and Imperial Pleasures in Game Design #DIGRA21" (Medium, December 7, 2021), https://archive.is/yilvS.

[301] Sawant, "In Conversation with Video Game Writer Meg Jayanth".

[302] Jayanth, "White Protagonism and Imperial Pleasures in Game Design #DIGRA21".

[303] Ibid.

[304] Ibid.

[305] Simon Parkin, "Meg Jayanth: The 80 Days Writer on the Interactive Power of Game-Play," *The Guardian: Games*, January 10, 2016, https://bit.ly/3WpiZWK.

[306] Jess Joho, "80 Days Writer Thinks You Should Stop Playing the Hero" (Kill Screen, March 15, 2016), https://killscreen.com/previously/articles/80-days-writer-thinks-you-should-stop-playing-the-hero/.

[307] Sawant, "In Conversation with Video Game Writer Meg Jayanth".

### 4.5.3 *Samsara* (2012)



Figure 4.25: Screenshot from *Samsara* (Jayanth, 2012), depicting a plot event with options to choose from.

Created by Jayanth for the royalty-free web platform StoryNexus [M2], *Samsara* received positive reviews upon its release. For example, renowned interactive fiction creator Emily Short praised *Samsara* as one of the most consistent and dynamic works published by StoryNexus:

> the scraps of dreams are visionary and evocative enough to be effective in short
> prose snippets, while the political context naturally provides multiple quest lines
> to pursue and allegiances to explore.[308]

Moreover, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*'s Samuel Horti underlined that Jayanth's *Samsara* "remains her biggest ever project,"[309] and it could also be considered her most personal work.

Set in Bengal in 1757, *Samsara* takes place during a critical moment in Bengali history [N1]. That year, the East India Company initiated a systematic and aggressive infiltration of Indian states, directly influencing the choice of Nawab knights in Bengal. Furthermore, they consistently portrayed Bengalis as Asian despots or "faithless Moors."[310] Ironically, while supposedly fighting against despotism, the Company *imposed its own form of despotism* in Bengal. Spencer A. Leonard argues that following the victorious Seven Years' War (1756-1763), the colonial autonomy of the Company diminished in favor of the Crown's Governor.

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[308] Emily Short, "Samsara (Meg Jayanth)" (Emily Short's Interactive Storytelling, October 31, 2012), https://emshort.blog/2012/10/31/samsara-meg-jayanth/.

[309] Samuel Horti, "The Coronation of Meghna Jayanth" (Electronic Gaming Monthly, February 28, 2020), https://egmnow.com/the-coronation-of-meghna-jayanth/.

[310] Robert Travers, "Ideology and British Expansion in Bengal, 1757–72," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 33, no. 1 (January 2005): 8–9, https://doi.org/10.1080/0308653042000329997.

Consequently, the United Kingdom shifted toward illiberalism and a new imperialism, backed by a conservative Tory-dominated parliament.[311] Robert Travers maintains that the British infiltration of Indian states resulted from "the sudden meshing of commercial, military and ideological pressures for territorial expansion," ultimately leading to the Company's control of Bengal[312] [S3].

*Samsara* explores the historical beginnings of British dominance in India through the lens of magical realism. The protagonist, a trusted servant and court magician of Aliwardi Khan the Nawab (the Bengali equivalent of a Western King), is tasked with unraveling a potential plot against the ruler [N2, N3]. The Nawab laments: "The British plot to annex Bengal. The French plot against the British. And my advisor plot against me. There is no-one I can trust" [S2]. The court magician, who can wander through other people's dreams, may help the Nawab uncover the scheme [N2]. However, progressing in the main storyline requires players to develop their character's spiritual growth, achieved through activities like reading manuscripts, taking contemplative swims, or dreaming [L1, L2]. As discussed below, spiritual growth is necessary to progress in the main thread [L3].

Like other StoryNexus games,[313] *Samsara* features relatively simple gameplay mechanics. Players manage inventory and statistics, altering them with a randomized deck of cards they can draw from [L1]. Players then trigger choice-based events, selecting options that shape their character's response to narrative events (Figure 4.25) [L2, L5]. Each option has a success rate based on the character's past skills: Imagination, Curiosity, Perception, and Serenity. Some options are more challenging than others and require accumulating an appropriate skill level before selection [L1].

For instance, when the player initiates a reading event, their character may choose an undemanding Assyrian text that costs no cards but grants one Visions card, essential for wandering through others' dreams. Notably, failures in choosing risky in-game options rarely result in negative consequences, except for acquiring Trauma cards needed to trigger certain events [L4]. Furthermore, *Samsara* rewards players for taking on complex challenges by slightly increasing specific skills, making future attempts more manageable [L2].

Several cards in *Samsara* can trigger events related to race, class, and sexuality. Jayanth subtly addresses topics aligned with Spivak's postcolonial theory, such as the position of

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311   Spencer A. Leonard, "'A Theatre of Disputes': The East India Company Election of 1764 as the Founding of British India," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 42, no. 4 (August 8, 2014): 597–98, https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2014.895134.

312   Travers, "Ideology and British Expansion in Bengal, 1757–72," 8–9.

313   See Short, "Samsara (Meg Jayanth)".

women in Bengal before British arrival. The intersectional themes in Jayanth's oeuvre are most evident in *Samsara*. The highlights the complex power dynamics not only between Western and Eastern Asian countries but also between males and females. For instance, players may initially sympathize with the Nawab, the ruler facing threats from both the British and internal opposition [S4]. However, they soon discover his darker side, including death penalty on a woman who rejected him in favor of his brother-in-law [N1]. The Muslim inhabitants, as the narrator says, "talk in hushed whispers of the Nawab's cruelty, his opium addiction, his debauchery" [S2]. The Nawab's wealthy and powerful aunt, Ghaseti Begum, has been imprisoned by him. However, if the player stands by Begum instead of the Nawab, she gives no gratitude and poisons the avatar. Thus, Begum also proves her cruelty in the pursuit of power. Then, the game comments: "together you have brought Bengal into crisis" [S2].

The game also portrays the complexity of female characters in Bengal, regardless of nationality. The protagonist's servant and life partner, Cani Theruvil, has supported the protagonist's rise in social status without regard for her own well-being. The game implies that the protagonist's ability to wander through others' dreams could stem from a parasitic relationship with Cani.

> [she] taught you to read, to write, to reason… she did not share your powers of walking in the dream… her sole focus was to provide you a safe haven in the treacherous dreaming without ever exploring its wonders for herself [S2].

Jayanth's game suggests that the avatar's ability to wander through the dreams of others could be the result of his parasitic relationship with Cani [S4]. *Samsara*'s complexity extends to an encounter with Catholic missionary Benigni, who travels to Bengal with an Afro-Caribbean companion. This interaction indirectly alludes to the themes of slavery in the Americas, demonstrating the game's multifaceted exploration of power dynamics and intersectional themes:

> It is abundantly clear that Benny is trying—rather unsuccessfully—to communicate with the long-haired man in stilted Portuguese. The man talks back in a tongue that is wholly unfamiliar. He leans forward, and you realise his skin is a reddish-brown shade that you have not seen before…The overseer—a tall, rather handsome white man in a crisp white shirt and embroidered cravat—stops to talk to the long-haired man…The man is not Indian, that much you are sure of—do you perhaps pity the stranger, robbed not only of freedom but nationality too? [S2]

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The protagonist's introspective concerns in *Samsara* foreshadow India's subjugation by European countries in the following decades. Thus, Jayanth's *Samsara*—though an unfinished project—provides a sophisticated commentary on Indian despotism, the exploitation of females in Bengal, and the impending reliance on the equally ruthless British East India Company [S4]. Jayanth's exploration of colonialism and the underrepresentation of women would reappear in her future work as a writer.

### 4.5.4 *80 Days* (2014)
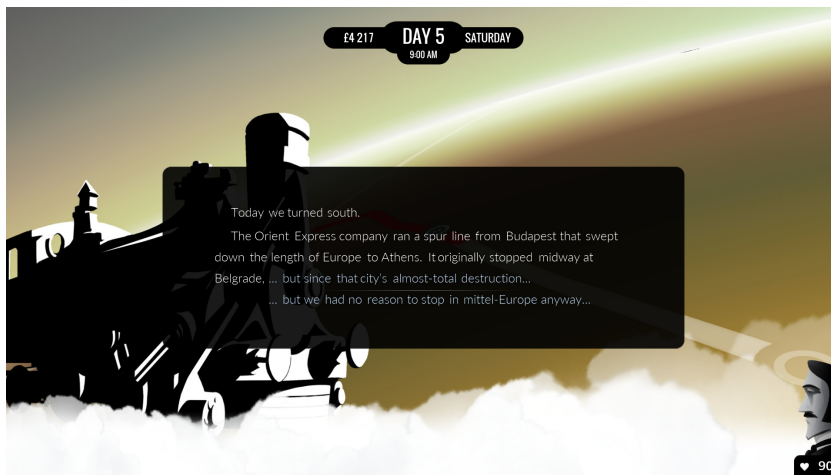


Figure 4.26: Screenshot from *80 Days* (Inkle, 2014), where Passepartout's diary is shown with the choice-based mechanics; on the right, an icon representing Fogg and his health points bar.

The re-writing of history in *Samsara* became a prelude to another reinterpretation of fiction: *80 Days*, produced by the British studio Inkle. Though its directors were Joseph Humfrey and Jon Ingold, Jayanth undoubtedly influenced the game's ultimate message.

In an interview, Jayanth explained that the project stemmed from Inkle's proposal to create a steampunk game based on the famous Jules Verne's novel *Around the World in 80 Days*.[314] However, because she "had seen a lot of steampunk set in London and New York," she sought to create a game with a more diverse steampunk reality, influenced by local contexts.[315] As a result, Jayanth wrote a script of 750,000 words, "more than the entire *Lord Of The Rings*

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314    Jules Verne, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, trans. G. M. Towle, e-book (1873; repr., Project Gutenberg, 1994), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/103/103-h/103-h.htm.

315    Sawant, "In Conversation with Video Game Writer Meg Jayanth".

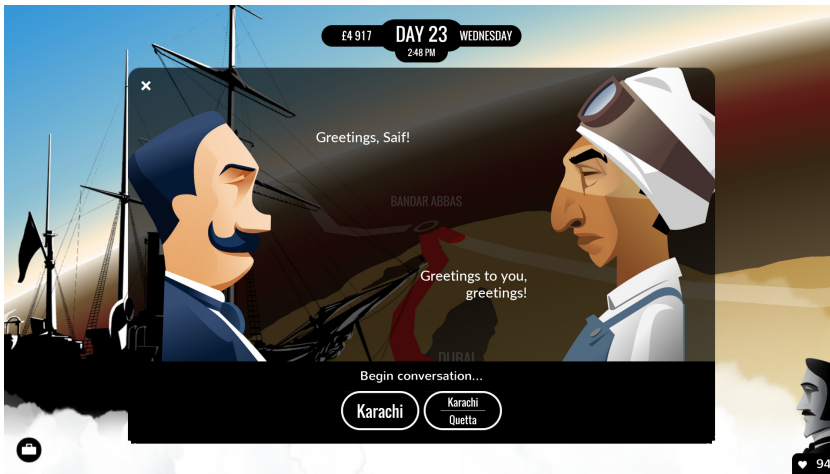Figure 4.27: Screenshot from *80 Days* (Inkle, 2014), depicting Passpartout's conversation with an Israeli sailor.

triloy and a little less than the *Game Of Thrones* books."[316] The choice to make a worldwide steampunk game allowed Jayanth to enrich the representation of marginalized groups in Verne's novel.

> If you're inventing a world, why not make it more progressive? Why not have women invent half the technologies, and pilot half the airships? Why not shift the balance of power so that Haiti rather than barely postbellum United States is ascendant in the region? Why not have a strong automaton-using Zulu Federation avert the Scramble for Africa? Why not have characters who play with gender and sexuality without fear of reprisal? History is full of women, and people of colour, and queer people, and minorities. That part isn't fantasy—the fantastical bit in our game is that they're (often but not always) allowed to have their own stories without being silenced and attacked. That their stories are not told as if they're exceptional.[317]

Before critiquing the progressive reinterpretation of Verne's classic novel, it is worth noting that *80 Days* was progressive in its meaning from the start. Verne's work, centered around English nobleman Phileas Fogg's attempt to circumnavigate the Earth in 80 days, does not glorify

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[316] Ibid.

[317] Meg Jayanth, "Fantasy, History and Respect," Tumblr (You Can Panic Now, October 18, 2014), https://assets.tumblr.com/assets/html/like_iframe.html?_v=66c22ab5319d742bca5762b8d18f9d06#name=derided&post_id=100280300365&color=black&rk=ShEXFA6F.

Fogg himself.  As Peter Sinnema argues, Verne, who wrote the novel following French Emperor Napoleon III's humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, was familiar with the consequences of imperial ambitions.[318]  Fogg, a wealthy citizen of the British Empire "on which the sun never sets," has surprisingly superficial thought horizons.  Ultimately, the real hero of the novel is Fogg's French valet Passepartout, who takes responsibility for achieving Fogg's bet.  For political reasons, *Around the World in 80 Days* departed from Verne's conventional stories of exotic journeys such as *A Journey into the Interior of the Earth*[319] or *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*.[320]  As Sinnema puts it,

> instead of the adventurer seeking out the exotic as an antidote to western modernity, Verne's novel presents an unlikely hero whose very lack of interest in the outside world makes it possible for him to traverse the globe as if he were a mere automaton, measuring time and space according to an internal and inscrutable mechanism.[321]

Jörg Dünne supports this interpretation, claiming that Fogg's journey leaves "little place (and time) for adventure."[322]  Fogg, a typical bourgeois European gentleman, does not bother about the environment around him.  Instead, Fogg—as Dunne says—treats every region he travels as the "mobile home";[323] that is, Fogg explores the world as if he were in the United Kingdom, focusing solely on his wager[324] [S3].

Paradoxically, Passepartout takes the initiative, saving Aouda, "the daughter of a wealthy Bombay merchant,"[325] from being sacrificed in the *suttee* ritual.  Verne writes, "it was Passepartout himself, who had slipped upon the pyre in the midst of the smoke and, profiting by the still overhanging darkness, had delivered the young woman from death!"[326]  Of course, Aouda ultimately becomes Fogg's wife, and Verne's use of the "damsel in distress" trope may now

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[318]  Peter W. Sinnema, "Around the World Without a Gaze: Englishness and the Press in Jules Verne," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 36, no. 2 (2003): 136, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20083927.

[319]  Jules Verne, *A Journey into the Interior of the Earth*, trans. Frederick Amadeus Malleson, e-book (1864; repr., London: Ward, Lock, & Co. Ltd., 2003), https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/3748/pg3748.html.

[320]  Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*, trans. Frederick Paul Walter, e-book (1871; repr., Project Gutenberg, 2001), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2488/2488-h/2488-h.htm.

[321]  Sinnema, "Around the World Without a Gaze," 142.

[322]  Jörg Dünne, "The World as Network and Tableau: Jules Verne's Around the World in Eighty Days Jörg Dünne," in *Globalizing Literary Genres: Literature, History, Modernity*, ed. Jernej Habjan and Fabienne Imlinger (Routledge, 2016), 117.

[323]  Ibid., 119.

[324]  Ibid.

[325]  Verne, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, chap. 13.

[326]  Ibid.

sound problematic in depicting colonialism. Still, Verne's novel repeatedly represents that of a white, goal-obsessed wealthy Briton detached from reality. In Jayanth's game adaptation, Fogg's pettiness becomes more accentuated, though Inkle's game remains true to the novel's core meaning.

*80 Days*, a game/hypertext hybrid with choice-based mechanics[327] [L1], also sets an objective: travel worldwide within the titular period [L1]. However, the player, like Passepartout, whose first-person narrative dominates the game, may initially feel disoriented. Routes on the globe emerge during conversations with other drivers and ticket inspectors [L2]. The player also needs to trade items or visit banks to ensure Fogg has enough money to continue the journey [L2]. Depending on the routes, transportation, and chosen dialogue trees, the journey's speed and Fogg's health and trust in Passepartout may change during play (Figure 4.26) [L2]. As the ludic *tabula rasa*, Passepartout's personality can be gradually shaped by the player's choices, which alter the future narrative [N4]. However, Jayanth's portrayal of Fogg is as biting as in Verne's original work. Early in the game, I found Passepartout's opinion that Fogg "prefered a hearty meal and an English newspaper to all the wonder that the modern world had to offer"[328] [S2]. Although this remark may not necessarily invoke Sinnema's analysis, another Passepartout's reflection on the Franco-Prussian war (a "grim, blood-soaked resistance") confirms that Jayanth's *80 Days* pays homage to the anti-imperial message present in Verne's novel [S4].

Naturally, anti-imperial motifs in Jayanth's game are reinforced. The game's writer reimagined Verne's novel with Asian futurism, introducing the steampunk genre and adding strong female and Indigenous characters [N3]. Regional inequality is less pronounced in the *80 Days*' world than in the 1870s. Jayanth's writing work includes inventors from around the world, such as a Mongolian progressive princess and mathematician, Goland, or Madagascar's charismatic queen Ranavalona II. There are also revolutionaries such as Signare Delphine Rossignol, who opposes slavery in Senegal, and traders such as renowned Iraqi businesswoman Jamuna Gajani [N3]. Aouda, the "damsel in distress" from the literary counterpart, becomes the charismatic leader of Indian mercenaries whom Fogg and Passepartout mistake for a virgin to be sacrificed. The player can even encounter Jewish sailors coursing in the Indian Ocean (Figure 4.27); Fogg's anti-Semitic views care revealed on that occasion. If the player gets to Calcutta with the Jewish

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[327] David E. Millard, "Games/Hypertext," in *Proceedings of the 31st ACM Conference on Hypertext and Social Media*, ed. Anastasia Salter and John F. Barber (HT '20: 31st ACM Conference on Hypertext and Social Media, New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2020), 124, https://doi.org/10.1145/3372923.3404775.

[328] Inkle Ltd., *80 Days*.

help, Fogg comments: "Did you see their noses? … [Q]uite how they are related to one another is best left unexplored, I think" [S2]. Thus, Fogg's judgement may distance the player further from the (in)famous explorer.

Despite these progressive elements, the entire world of Jayanth's *80 Days* is not without issues. Slavery persists in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, female oppression remains in Northern India (to the point that one of the female inventors, al-Talib, hides in a male disguise), and genocide of First Nations in North America continues. Nevertheless, Jayanth encapsulates the diversity and multicultural heritage of the Earth [S4]. Unlike the self-absorbed Fogg, Passepartout, a playable character, needs to interact with people of different cultures to succeed; every conversation unlocks new routes beautifully drawn over the virtual globe [S1]. Along with the multi-cultural game world, such an animation highlights the connections between the fictional 1870s and the modern world driven by globalization. Indian-American researcher Arjun Appadurai argued that globalization:

> has shrunk the distance between elites, shifted key relations between producers and consumers, broken many links between labor and family life, obscured the lines between temporary locales and imaginary national attachments.[329]

The decline of nation-states praised by Appadurai is now debatable. have rapidly increased, even in multi-national India, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi has begun dismantling the foundations of democracy by persecuting non-Hindu ethnic and religious minorities.[330] However, Jayanth's game, like Appadurai's research, condemns nationalism and imperialist ambitions overall, evidenced by the secondary thread of the game: the presence of the Artificers' Guild [S4].

In *80 Days*, the Artificers are an international group of engineers and inventors who aim to develop new vehicles and artificial intelligence. They hold significant political influence in numerous in-game locations, angering certain monarchs like the Austro-Hungarian Emperor. During play, the Artificers' devices are confiscated by Austria-Hungary's customs inspection. The country wages a disastrous war with Ottoman Empire, which maintains close contact with the Artificers. The conflict arises from rivalry in producing mechanical men (automata); Austria-Hungary creates automata for military purposes and fears that Artificers will steal their

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[329]  Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 9–10.

[330]  Shakuntala Rao, "Narendra Modi's Social Media Election Campaign and India's Delegative Democracy," *The Communication Review* 23, no. 3 (2020): 238, https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2020.1829306.

technologies [N1]. The Emperor's imperial paranoia results in the destruction of Ottoman-controlled Belgrade, leading Passepartout to comment, "Vienna was at once the City of Music, and [now] the City of War."

The Artificers' Guild's presence illustrates the contradictory processes known since the 1990s as "glocalization,"[331] the McWorld vs Jihad clash,[332] or the homogenization/heterogenization conflict.[333] These terms describe "the simultaneous occurrence of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies in contemporary social, political, and economic systems"[334] [S3]. In the fractured world of Jayanth's *80 Days*, players encounter various people who represent fundamentally different attitudes toward the changing world. For example, progressive female inventors from the Middle East contrast with Catholic nuns in Siam (former Thailand), who see the Artificers' artificial intelligence as "godless creatures." The in-game conflicts between progressives and conservatives, even among females as Jayanth's game highlights following the intersectional paradigm, are closer to the contemporary world. Yet, these conflicts are projected into the quasi-fictional reality of the 19th century, where similar glocalized processes began to emerge.

### 4.5.5  *Sunless Sea* (2015) and *Sunless Skies* (2019)

After developing *80 Days*, Jayanth collaborated with Failbetter Games under the creative direction of Alexis Kennedy, who would soon also become the designer of *Cultist Simulator*.[335] While working as a freelancer, Jayanth held a minor position in the studio, though. Alongside prominent interactive fiction writers Emily Short and Lebanese contributor Amal El-Mohtar, she contributed to 30% of the game script for *Sunless Sea*.[336] Still, this work became a consistent part of her oeuvre as a piece of modular storytelling, which the *Game Developer* magazine described as "something akin to a collection of short stories tied together with character or theme."[337] However, Jayanth felt deceived and exploited during her collaboration with Kennedy. In 2019, she accused him of "using his professional, financial and social power to exploit women

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[331] Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992), 173–74.

[332] Benjamin Barber, *Jihad Vs. McWorld* (1992; repr., London: Corgi, 2011).

[333] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 32–33.

[334] Joachim Blatter, "Glocalization," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 22, 2022, https://www.britannic.com/topic/glocalization.

[335] Weather Factory, *Cultist Simulator*, version Windows (United Kingdom: Humble Bundle, 2018).

[336] "*Sunless Sea*, *80 Days* and the Rise of Modular Storytelling," *Game Developer*, December 25, 2015, https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/-i-sunless-sea-i-i-80-days-i-and-the-rise-of-modular-storytelling.

[337] Ibid.

Figure 4.28: Screenshot from *Sunless Sea* (Failbetter Games, 2015), depicting Meg Jayanth's authorial signature.



Figure 4.29: Screenshot from *Sunless Sea* (Failbetter Games, 2015), showing the game's interface and the journey round the hostile world.

sexually + professionally. He has threatened many women with retaliation to ensure silence + compliance."[338]

Indeed, Kennedy used Jayanth's skills to develop his series about Fallen London: a Victorian-era London that fell beneath the Earth's surface to an underground ocean called Unterzee. In 2009, Kennedy wrote a text-based interactive fiction game called *Fallen London*,[339] followed by a prequel, *The Tales of Fallen London: The Silver Tree*,[340] also developed by himself. Inspired by steampunk iconography, the games about Fallen London consist of short stories about living and dying in a dark, unfriendly world [N1]. In this posthuman setting, people coexist with cats, rats, and other creatures on their islands. *Sunless Sea* shares this setting [N1].

Similar to its predecessor *Fallen London*, which allowed players to engage in "performative identity play" by choosing a male, female, or non-binary avatar,[341] *Sunless Sea* starts by defining the player's avatar, including gender, personality, and ultimate goal [L1]. As a ship captain, the player explores the terrains and waters east of Fallen London, managing limited supplies of coal and fending off pirates and Lovecraftian creatures attacking the ship. The maps are partially randomized, and the player can quickly and permanently lose their captain during unsuccessful battles [L2, L4]. However, the player can preserve some of the deceased captain's possessions, such as maps, wealth, or lodging, by creating a will for their successor. For example, a former captain's rival might inherit a ship with a torpedo tube, while a correspondent may gain the map of discovered isles [L2]. However, like in roguelike games or *Dark Souls*-inspired productions, all other achievements are lost during each new session [L4].

Interestingly, *Sunless Sea*'s gameplay bears similarities to Jayanth's *Samsara* [M5]. Like in her debut, players can gain experience points in several categories (Iron, Mirrors, Veils, Pages, Hearts) [L2]. For instance, Iron affects the damage dealt to enemies during confrontations, while Veils influence the ship's speed and the range at which enemies detect the avatar. Modifying these statistics, like in *Samsara*, necessitates taking risks. *Sunless Sea* encourages this, as one avatar's death does not end the game but imparts new knowledge about the mysterious world east of Fallen London [L3]. The game's commentary highlights its core message: "Explore. Take risks. Your first captain will probably die. Later captains may succeed." [S2]

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[338]  Cf. Tom Phillips, "Two Women Accuse Cultist Simulator Developer Alexis Kennedy of "Exploitative" Behaviour" (Eurogamer.net, September 16, 2019), https://www.eurogamer.net/two-women-accuse-cultist-simulator-developer-alexis-kennedy-of-exploitative-behaviour.

[339]  Failbetter Games, *Fallen London*, version Web (United Kingdom: Failbetter Games, 2009).

[340]  Failbetter Games, *The Tales of Fallen London: The Silver Tree*, version Windows (United Kingdom: Failbetter Games, 2012).

[341]  K. Van Den Beukel, "Fallen London: Authorship in Game Allegory," *Paradoxa* 29 (May 1, 2018): 20, https://openresearch.lsbu.ac.uk/item/86v0z.

Furthermore, ship captains write logbooks, which, despite being directly addressed to the player, contribute to the game world's atmosphere. For example, during gameplay, players may encounter logs resembling Lovecraftian short stories: "Where is everyone? Where did they go? …they're here. They're here. You're not alone" (Figure 4.29) [S2]. Indeed, *Sunless Sea* emphasizes the uncertainty of humans facing the vast, titular oceanic expanse. However, Magdalena Kozyra argues that the specific aesthetics and frequent deaths during journeys underscore a constant sense of threat and failure more akin to Joseph Conrad's literary works than Lovecraftian short stories.[342] Conrad's novels, Kozyra contends, are about "recognizing one's true nature," an unprepared challenge for human beings, and the dangers lurking in everyday life, especially aboard a ship, as well as the traumatic colonial legacy, particularly evident in Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*[343] [S3].

However, my research perspective is less concerned with the themes of loneliness and danger in *Sunless Sea* than with the conflict between Kennedy and Jayanth. She contributed to specific parts of the game, such as the city of Varchas, the Carnelian Coast, and the Isle of Cats. On the Isle of Cats, players may encounter the Pirate-King,[344] a tiger who "looks more like a lawyer than a dissolute lord."[345] Named Leopold, the Pirate-King thrives on the Isle of Cats through honey-beer trade and by running a massage parlor [N1, N3].

Furthermore, Jayanth's Pirate-King storyline in the game seems to encapsulate her collaboration with Kennedy more directly. King Leopold profits from liquor trafficking and prostitution, embodying both an absolute ruler and sexual assaulter. It is difficult not to see a connection between this character and Jayanth's freelance work with the game's creative director [S3].

Arguably, Jayanth's most personal contribution to *Sunless Sea* is her authorial signature as the Alarming Scholar (Figure 4.28). The Alarming Scholar is a researcher in The Admiralty Survey Office, where players can report discoveries and sell valuable items for the virtual currency called Echos. Significantly, the Alarming Scholar is described as follows:

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342   Magdalena Kozyra, "'The Sea Has Never Been Friendly to Man.' Joseph Conrad's Topoi in the Digital Game Sunless Sea," *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)*, no. XIV (2019): 87–88, http://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=988927.

343   Ibid., 90; see also Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, e-book (1899; repr., Project Gutenberg, 2006), https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/219.

344   "Guest Islands" (Failbetter Games, May 28, 2014), https://www.failbettergames.com/news/guest-islands; Meg Jayanth, "The Isle of Cats," Tumblr (You Can Panic Now, November 15, 2014), https://assets.tumblr.com/assets/html/like_iframe.html?_v=66c22ab5319d742bca5762b8d18f9d06#name=derided&post_id=102653745595&color=black&rk=BzWwsSl5&root_id=102643059169.

345   Failbetter Games, *Sunless Sea*.

The Alarming Scholar is mercurial, to say the least. A creature of sudden moods and provoking teeth. Possibly her (is it her?) appointment as University Maritime Liaison was precautionary: to keep his (is it his?) razor-sharp enthusiasm from causing too many injuries in the faculty[346] [S2].

The Alarming Scholar's ironic pseudonym and description may convey their precarious position in academia. This character stands apart from others due to their unstable gender, race, and "razor-sharp enthusiasm," resulting in a lower-level role within academia. Could this also be an autobiographical reflection of Jayanth's work relations with Kennedy? [S3] Perhaps. Her collaboration with the directors of *Sunless Skies*, a game co-written after Kennedy's departure, proved to be less contentious.



Figure 4.30: Screenshot from *Sunless Skies* (Failbetter Games, 2015), demonstrating the ridiculous conversation with the Fastidious Inspector about extending the laborers' worktime.

After contributing to *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (mentioned in a subsection below), Jayanth was hired again by Failbetter Games. Kennedy left the company in 2016, and the responsibility of rescuing Failbetter from financial decline fell on Maley Ursus, who was later recognized as a Game Dev Hero in 2018.[347] Ursus successfully launched a crowdfunding project on Kickstarter.[348] Despite a predominantly male leadership team (Paul Arendt, Chris Gardiner, Liam Welton, and the lead designer Adam Myers), the group of writers was more diverse.

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[346] Ibid.
[347] "Winners 2018" (Game Dev Heroes), accessed June 18, 2022, https://gamedevheroes.co/game-dev-heroes-winners-2018/.
[348] Ibid.

Jayanth collaborated with prominent British and American journalists-writers like Kieron Gillen, Cassandra Khaw, Emily Short, and Richard Cobbett. Gardiner, a creative director, was described as "one of the best and nicest writers working in the industry today."[349] The specific contributions of individual writers, including Jayanth, remain to be uncovered.[350]

Nonetheless, Gardiner closely consulted with Jayanth on the anti-imperialist message of the project, positioning *Sunless Skies* as a satire on the declining British global domination: "empires are good at justifying abhorrence, and they are good at distributing responsibility. The British Empire could hide the cost of its colonization of India, because India was far away."[351] Myers suggested relocating the player's starting point from ramshackle London to Reach, the emerging colony geographically resembling North America, to decentralize the player's focus on the former empire. As Gardiner said, "[London] doesn't feel like home—it feels strange to you, which helped us with this theme of interrogating empire."[352] Consequently, *Sunless Skies* would emerge as an anti-imperialist and anti-colonial work, with London feeling inferior to its colony [S4].

Although connected to Kennedy's Fallen London universe—where the Earth is still dominated by a vast, terrifying oceanic space filled with pirate ships and Lovecraftian monsters [N1]—*Sunless Skies* employs a more accessible interface and easier-to-learn mechanics [S1, L1]. Instead of a defenseless ship, players can control a more agile steam machine capable of firing at aggressive pirate ships and monsters [L2]. Moreover, *Sunless Skies* is more political than previous installments in the universe. In-game characters ignore the real aquatic threat to their existence and prepare for internal war [N1]. This includes the Winchester War, an independence conflict between the Reach colony and London, a fictionalized version of the American Revolution, and a civil war in the metropolis between the aristocratic West-Enders and proletarians from the East End district. Both sides identify as Red vs Blue, reminiscent of real-life clashes between the Conservative Party and Labour Party in the United Kingdom or the recent struggle between Democrats and Republicans in the United States [N1, S3].

As noted by interviewer Edwin Evans-Thirlwell, the Failbetter Games studio, with a predominantly American development team, clearly favored the Reach side. Jayanth was no exception,

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349   Brock Wilbur, "Interview: Richard Cobbett on Nighthawks - The Vampire RPG" (Rely on Horror, September 10, 2018), https://www.relyonhorror.com/in-depth/interview-richard-corbett-on-nighthawks-the-vampire-rpg/.

350   Philippa Warr, "Sunless Skies' Cosmos Features Cider, Cricket, and Tentacle Monsters," *PC Gamer*, June 21, 2018, https://www.pcgamer.com/sunless-skies-cosmos-features-cider-cricket-and-tentacle-monsters/.

351   Edwin Evans-Thirlwell, "The Making Of... Sunless Skies," *Edge*, no. 337, November 7, 2019, https://www.pressreader.com/australia/edge/20191107.

352   Ibid.

as she came from postcolonial India.[353] As a result, London and Albion are constantly ridiculed. For instance, Londoners morbidly end conversations with the player by saying they need a cup of tea, without questioning its origin or extraction process, reflecting their ignorance. Consultations between Gardiner and Jayanth led to a darkly comical, yet authentic portrayal of the Victorian Empire, where ethnic minorities and underprivileged social classes faced harsh oppression [N1].

For example, the London-based Fastidious Inspector, one of the characters transported by the player's machine [N3], enthusiastically comments on the Empress's decision to extend work hours by slowing time clocks: "Oh, hours have more uses than that, We use them to increase the efficiency of workworlds, to spend journeys to distant regions, to resolve overcrowding in prison… time knots and stretches like wool on the loom." The game ironically paraphrases the decree: "you can become rich, mining for hours" (Figure 4.30) [S2]. Thus, *Sunless Skies* mocks the flawed neoliberal dogma of trickle-down economics, which suggests that the poor must work harder for the wealthy to become rich [S4]. In contrast, recent research shows a reverse wealth distribution from the poor to the rich.[354] Due to the game's rhetoric, Evans-Thirlwell even sees *Sunless Skies* as a hybrid of Einstein and Dickens, illustrating the resurgence of 19th-century paleoliberalism in contemporary reality.[355]

However, the game also features less comical portrayals of social exclusion. For instance, during a journey to Hybras, an island on the edge of the Reach, the player encounters decaying signs of the Empire: "Rotting buildings slough gently into decay. Maintenance is poor, the population aged." [S2] This represents another aspect of the Victorian imperial conquest: many elderly, impoverished colonizers left behind. Despite their unknown complexion and appearance, the colonizers at Hybras could be likened to the derogatory term "white trash"—poor Anglo-Saxons with a history marked by failure and no future[356] [N3, S3]. Nonetheless, the in-game inhabitants of Hybras do not seem to worry about the future, as the war does not

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[353] Ibid.

[354] Merter Akinci, "Inequality and Economic Growth: Trickle-down Effect Revisited," *Development Policy Review* 36, no. S1 (2018): O1–24, https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12214; Augustin Kwasi Fosu, "Growth, Inequality, and Poverty Reduction in Developing Countries: Recent Global Evidence," *Research in Economics* 71, no. 2 (June 1, 2017): 306–36, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rie.2016.05.005; Michèle Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2000), 125.

[355] Edwin Evans-Thirlwell, "How Video Games Are Reimagining Britain for the Brexit Era," *The Guardian: Games*, May 7, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/games/2019/may/07/how-video-games-are-reimagining-britain-for-the-brexit-era.

[356] John Hartigan, "Unpopular Culture: The Case of 'White Trash'," *Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (May 1997): 316–43, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502389700490171.

concern them. Or so it seems. Later, the player learns that the island's population was entirely wiped out. Whether by monsters, enemies, or the symbolic destruction of a generation that could no longer contribute to the Empire remains uncertain.

In *Sunless Skies*, Meg Jayanth's specific contributions may be unclear, but her authorial signature remains present. In New Winchester, there is a tavern named "The Promise of Days," where players can interact with a group of regulars, including a monster-hunter named Meg the Spatchcocker.[357] Meg utters a profoundly existential sentence: "Keep an eye out. The skies didn't never want us here." This statement not only refers to the existential condition of humans (as freaks of nature without the help of divine forces) but also alludes to the colonial status of underprivileged groups, contrasting with London elites who would prefer to forget those who contributed to their wealth and position [S4].

### 4.5.6  *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017)



Figure 4.31: Screenshot from *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017), depicting Aloy excited by a hologram activated with the Focus device.

*Horizon: Zero Dawn* may seem like the least influenced game on which Jayanth collaborated. Developed by Dutch studio Guerrilla Games, *Horizon* is a role-playing action game directed by Mathijs de Jonge, Jan-Bart van Beek, John Gonzalez, and Michiel van der Leeuw. Consequently, the game's development was male-dominated. Also, Ben McCaw was a lead writer, and Jayanth is credited only for additional writing, along with Ben Schroder, Anne Toole, and Dee Warrick.

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[357]   Spatchcocking is a method of preparing the chicken for cooking by removing its backbone from the tail to the neck.

Nevertheless, Jayanth's contribution helped strengthen the progressive meaning of the game. For her input to the scenario, Jayanth received a co-award for "Outstanding Achievement in Videogame Writing" from the Writers' Guild of America.[358]

However, *Horizon Zero Dawn* has primarily been analyzed as an auto-polemical work of Guerrilla Games, a studio known for such masculinist war games as *Killzone*[359] and *Shellshock: Nam '67*.[360] According to Michael O'Krent, who sees *Horizon* as an ecofeminist work:

> *Zero Dawn* is the anti-*Killzone* and the anti-Gamergate. It rewrites the conceptual underpinnings of gender inequality in computing by centering femininity in an attempt to elevate videogames into a set of cultural institutions in which a basic understanding of gender relations is expected.[361]

O'Krent positions *Horizon Zero Dawn* within the cultural field of digital games, a medium aspiring to be an art form. Although debating whether a game can be artistic expression in 2021 may seem outdated, O'Krent demonstrates that the recognition of *Horizon* and its contributors, including Jayanth, mainly resulted from their response to the GamerGate controversy. In her excellent essay on *Horizon*, Gabriela T. Richard's insightful essay on *Horizon* highlights how its contributors challenged toxic gamer culture and GamerGate followers' attempts to claim that even females supported their cause.[362] The alt-right used a white, red-headed female mascot, Vivian James, as an "average female gamer" fighting against "Social Justice Warriors" who supposedly misrepresented the "real" gaming community.[363] Meanwhile, Guerrilla Games subverted the archetype of a white, red-headed woman as a symbol of "diversity" in gaming.[364]

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[358] Gregg Mitchell, "2018 Writers Guild Awards Winners Announced" (Writers Guild of America West, February 11, 2018), https://www.wga.org/news-events/news/press/2018/2018-writers-guild-awards-winners-announced.

[359] Guerrilla Games, *Killzone*, version PlayStation 2 (Eidos Interactive, 2004).

[360] Guerrilla Games, *Shellshock: Nam '67*, version Windows (Eidos Interactive, 2004).

[361] Michael O'Krent, "Welcome to the Field: Cultural Capital for Videogames and the Ecofeminist Position-Taking of Horizon Zero Dawn," *Journal of World Literature* 6, no. 3 (September 13, 2021): 437, https://doi.org/10.1163/24056480-00603010.

[362] Gabriela T. Richard, "Playing as a Woman (of Color) as If a (White) Man: Reflections on Game Culture, Intersectionality, and Future Visions in the Era of Livestreaming and Esports," in *Well Played Retrospective: The Past, Pandemic and Future of Video Games, Value and Meaning*, ed. Drew Davidson et al. (Lulu Press, Inc, 2021), 55–82.

[363] Thomas Apperley and Mahli-Ann Rakkomkaew Butt, "Vivian James – The Politics of #Gamergate's Avatar," in *DiGRA/FDG '16 - Abstract Proceedings of the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG*, vol. 13 (Digital Games Research Association and Society for the Advancement of the Science of Digital Games, Dundee: Digital Games Research Association and Society for the Advancement of the Science of Digital Games, 2016), 1–2, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/paper_154.pdf.

[364] Richard, "Playing as a Woman (of Color) as If a (White) Man," 71.

Of course, *Horizon*'s main protagonist, Aloy, represents an archetypical "whiteness." Aloy is a stereotypically masculinized woman, mentally and physically strong [N1]. However, Aloy's persona is a far cry from far-right rhetorics associated with Vivian James. Unlike James, who was used to solidify racialized and sexist discourse within gaming communities, Aloy holds no prejudices against people of different races and cultures.[365] Aloy is asexual as well; Dalila Forni rightfully argues that "Aloy goes beyond gender: she is a woman, but her main characteristic is not to be female."[366] Perhaps this is why Aloy, who interacts with various cultural groups, is treated as an outcast from the beginning of her life—a feeling Jayanth likely experienced.

*Horizon*'s action takes place in a post-apocalyptic world where humans live in primordial communities, defending themselves from powerful machines that behave like mammals. Humanity's survival in this world was made possible by Elisabet Sobeck, a scientist from the Old World era (before the human apocalypse). A climate catastrophe caused by the overproduction of military robots forced humans to live underground. Before humans faced extinction, Sobeck launched the titular Zero Dawn project to restore life on Earth and return humans of all races to the planet. However, Ted Faro, the central executive officer responsible for the Old World's over-militarization, foolishly and cynically opened the gates to polluted air, killing all survivors. After hundreds of years, life on Earth was restored. Aloy, as it turns out, is Sobeck's spiritual daughter, but also an orphan raised by Rost, another outcast warrior [N1].

The first playable scene of *Horizon* begins in Aloy's childhood. After being humiliated by the natives of the matriarchal Nora tribe, Aloy runs away and falls into a cave where former Old World humans resided [N1, N2]. Among human remains, she finds a device called Focus that enables her to scan the gaming environment for human and robot trails, electronic devices, and enemies' weak points [L1, N4]. The device also allows her to activate holographic records of Old World humans. In one of the most poignant scenes in *Horizon*, Aloy accidentally activates a holographic memory of a child whose African American father celebrates the child's birthday. For the first time, Aloy experiences what Edgar Morin called "projection-identification,"[367] interpreting an unreal cinematographic spectacle as close to our world and recognizing our beliefs, concerns, and traits in its characters.[368] While not seeing a real man (only his holographic

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[365]   Ibid., 70–71.

[366]   Dalila Forni, "Horizon Zero Dawn: The Educational Influence of Video Games in Counteracting Gender Stereotypes," *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 5, no. 1 (2019): 92, https://doi.org/10.26503/todigra.v5i1.111.

[367]   Edgar Morin, *The Cinema, or, the Imaginary Man*, trans. Lorraine Mortimer (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

[368]   Morin describes the "projection-identification" with the following words: "Projection is a universal and multiform process. Our needs, our aspirations, our desires, our obsessions, our fears, project themselves

projection), Aloy becomes moved by his words: "Look, Daddy can't be here with you and mom, but… We can still have a party, right? Sure we can" [S2]. Identifying with another kid's point-of-view, Aloy excitedly screams: "Show me! Show me again!" and manipulates the hologram as a real-world child would with a tablet or smartphone (Figure 4.31) [N2, S2].

*Horizon: Zero Dawn* further develops the Focus narrative. When Aloy exits the cave and meets Rost, he notices her device and tries to confiscate it. Aloy resists, having experienced the benefits of Focus. Rost later dismisses Aloy's device as a mere "**plaything**" [S2]. However, Aloy soon leverages Focus during stealth challenges, including the rite of passage that lets her join the Nora tribe. Although Rost's comment is somewhat valid, *Horizon: Zero Dawn* ultimately serves as a meta-commentary on technology's impact on humanity [S4]. Focus proves useful for Aloy and the player, marking enemies and their paths [L2]. Yet, since the Nora competition, called the Proving, is disrupted by aggressive Eclipse fanatics who kill Rost and target Aloy, Focus is also used for lethal purposes [L3].

Additionally, the device is utilized by Sylens, a mysterious man who helps Aloy uncover the Old Ones' fate but manipulates her for unclear reasons. The player later discovers that Sylens was involved in the HADES project, aimed at annihilating all life on Earth, while the sociopathic Helis strives to maintain this course. After an ambush, Aloy finds herself weaponless and without Focus at the cultists' Citadel fortress, initially reacting as if she has lost a loved one [N2]. She must then devise an alternative way to escape her death sentence and free herself from captivity [L3].

The theme of technology dependence in *Horizon: Zero Dawn* is more prominent than humanity's approach to the climate crisis. The environmental message is somewhat deficient. Megan Condis convincingly argues that *Horizon* prioritizes a "combat-heavy gameworld" over the game's environmental narrative, appealing more to players. Slow violence—the prolonged historical processes leading to the in-game climate catastrophe—is replaced by faster, more engaging degradation and "combat-heavy mechanics" [S3]:

> we learn about the slow violence of environmental degradation that unfolded in the
> distant past of Aloy's world in an abstract way. However, in the game's present as
> it is experienced by the player, this slow violence has been superseded by a much
> more visceral, more exciting foe. Rather than allowing the economic and cultural

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not only into the void as dreams and imaginings, but onto all things and all beings. … In the process of identification, the subject, instead of projecting himself into the world, absorbs the world into himself. Identification incorporates the environment into the self and integrates it affectively" (ibid., 85–86).

incentives that caused the world's downfall to serve as the primary villain, the game substitutes a new opponent, one that is much more fun for players to beat up.[369]

Although *Horizon: Zero Dawn* has a simplified and inconsistent main quest, it becomes more engaging during secondary quests. Patricia Hernandez from *Kotaku* wrote in her review that fighting human enemies was tedious and unwelcome, leading her to seek refuge in side quests to avoid them and instead befriend people from different cultures.[370] To be precise, to avoid other *human enemies* in favor of *befriending people of other cultures*. Here, Jayanth's influence as a shy decision-maker is evident. As *The Guardian* notes, Jayanth edited not only gaming narratives but also dialogues.[371] These are the dialogue-driven side quests that extend Aloy's ability, which manifested itself during her initial encounter with a hologram: empathy towards people of all cultures. For instance, early in the game, Aloy meets a dark-skinned Nora outcast woman, Olara, who asks her to find her brother Brom, who suffers from a schizophrenia-like illness. Brom, who had killed a hunter under the influence of "distant voices," climbs in guilt into a huge rock and considers suicide. Depending on the player's choices, Aloy can prevent Brom from committing suicide by selecting different dialogue lines (Table 4.2) [N4].

The dialogue trees are designed so that the game does not immediately punish Aloy with Brom's death. However, experimentation reveals that the most empathetic option is also the most emotionally rewarding. Furthermore, numerous side quests further showcase Aloy's empathy, such as helping a yellow-skinned woman, Arana, find her injured father and locate her lost spear. These side quests, likely influenced by Jayanth, differ from games like *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*,[372] where the protagonist Geralt of Rivia must often choose a "lesser evil," and every choice made has dire consequences revealing his inherent dark side.[373] In contrast, *Horizon: Zero Dawn* primarily highlights Aloy's positive qualities and demonstrates that decisions do not always result in unfortunate events or ongoing player trauma [N2, N3, N5].

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369   Megan Condis, "Sorry, Wrong Apocalypse: Horizon Zero Dawn, Heaven's Vault, and the Ecocritical Videogame," *Game Studies* 20, no. 3 (2020), https://bit.ly/3IuRrcx, sect. 3.

370   Patricia Hernandez, "Horizon Zero Dawn: The Kotaku Review" (Kotaku, February 28, 2017), https://kotaku.com/horizon-zero-dawn-the-kotaku-review-1792538336.

371   Amelia Heathman, "Gamechangers: Meet the New Generation Deciding the Way We Play Now," *The Guardian*, April 6, 2018, https://www.proquest.com/docview/2022295894/1AEE2104E61144A1PQ/1?accountid=196403.

372   CD Projekt RED, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, version Windows (Poland: CD Projekt, 2015).

373   See Thomas Bowen, "12 Times Geralt Was The True Villain Of The Witcher 3" (Game Rant, March 16, 2021), https://gamerant.com/geralt-true-villain-witcher-3/.

Table 4.2: Dialogue lines Aloy can use to help Brom step from the edge of the rock.

| Type of dialogue lines | Aloy's line | Brom's response |
|---|---|---|
| Aggressive | Get a hold of yourself and listen. The only voice that matters is mine. Now step back from the edge! | Yes. They are spirits. You are of the flesh. Olara always told me that if I see one speaker, I must ignore the others. |
| Sensitive | So many voices to listen to, it must make your head hurt. I promise my voice will be soft and soothing. | A soft voice... like Olara's? It's been so long. Years. Yes. I will listen. |
| Tricky | I'm not shouting. You are a good listener. So come listen to me, just as you would the others. | They – they say not to listen, but – but Olara always said never ignore a speaker I can see! All right. I'll hear you out. |

*Horizon: Zero Dawn* showcases Jayanth's influence through Aloy's complex personality. While the main storyline ineffectively struggles with blending slow violence and environmental messaging, the side quests allow Aloy to interact without prejudice with people from various cultures, helping the developers avoid appropriation by GamerGate followers. The game emphasizes diversity and intersectionality, presenting a world where cultures and religions are socially constructed [S4], and no divine being can save humanity from extinction. The All-Mother, worshipped by the Nora matriarch, "is nothing more than a huge mechanical door controlled by an AI that 'speaks' with a female-like computer-generated voice."[374] Ultimately, *Horizon: Zero Dawn* urges players to build a better world on their own and protect it from male fanaticism [S4].

### 4.5.7 *Falcon Age* (2019)

Meanwhile, Jayanth joined Outerloop Games, a Seattle-based studio covered by experienced director Chandana Ekanayake, who was born in Sri Lanka.[375] In her new project, *Falcon Age*,

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[374] Lars de Wildt et al., "'Things Greater Than Thou': Post-Apocalyptic Religion in Games," *Religions* 9, no. 6 (2018): 179, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9060169.

[375] Andrew Webster, "Falcon Age Is a Game about Cute Birds and Fighting Colonialism" (The Verge, April 11, 2019), https://bit.ly/41Vs1vJ.

Figure 4.32: Screenshot from *Falcon Age* (Outerloop Games, 2019), depicting the first-person perspective and the falcon petted by Sarangerai.



Figure 4.33: Screenshot from *Falcon Age* (Outerloop Games, 2019), depicting Sarangerai's aunt and the dialogue tree during a conversation.

Jayanth co-wrote the story and narrative with Ekanayake, who oversaw direction and design. Their close collaboration aimed to create a VR game that would allegorically portray British colonialism in India within a sci-fi setting.[376] Other writers who joined the studio included Aung Zaw Oo, Cassandra Khaw, and Justin LaLone. Nonetheless, IGN's Jonathon Dornbush highlighted primarily Jayanth's contributions, writing in his review: "With writing by *80 Days'* Meg Jayanth, Cassandra Khaw, and Chandana Ekanayake, *Falcon Age* explores a fascinating tale of reigniting a resistance that's largely given up the fight. Rather than going big or grand with its events, the most intriguing moments come from small character interactions."[377] *Push Square*'s Liam Croft, while not paying attention to particular game contributors, said in a similar tone: "the experience demonstrates a level of maturity, understanding, and respect that games even in the AAA space could only hope to achieve."[378]

Like *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, *Falcon Age* tells a story about a world dominated by machines [N1]. However, *Falcon Age* centers on Indian resistance, clearly referencing British colonialism without adopting a white perspective. Furthermore, the game adopts the heroine's point of view, a decision influenced by the need to adapt *Falcon Age* for VR devices [N2, M1].

The story of *Falcon Age* revolves around Indian resistance against the Outer Loop Company, a clear reference to the British East India Company. The protagonist is Sarangerai, a young Indian female prisoner who works in ore mining [N3]. Stripped from the original name (machines shortened it to Ara and assigned a prison number, 0507), Sarangerai is constantly indoctrinated (or "re-oriented" as the machines say). One of the Company's machines uses derogatory phrases to describe Sarangerai's homeland: "It is primitive and backwards and there are birds who will destroy your friends" [S2]. Then, it asks the player's avatar: "What is the best way to be good?," "What is your one responsibility as a citizen?" [S2] Interestingly, the default responses in Falcon Age express obedience. To advance, the player must choose answers that allow the protagonist to challenge the interrogator. Unable to tolerate her disobedience, the interrogator attempts to kill Sarangerai. However, in the meantime, she befriends a falcon that helps her escape (Figure 4.32) [N3].

Sarangerai discovers a baby falcon near her prison cell in the game's opening sequence. If the player treats it well, the bird helps Sarangerai escape [L2]. A heartwarming element of the game emerges, as the player must regularly feed and pet the falcon to bond with their

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[376]    Ibid.

[377]    Jonathon Dornbush, "Falcon Age Review" (IGN, April 29, 2020), https://www.ign.com/articles/2019/04/09/falcon-age-review.

[378]    Liam Croft, "Review: Falcon Age - PSVR Classic Combines Meaningful Storytelling with Adorable Birds" (Push Square, April 9, 2019), https://www.pushsquare.com/reviews/ps4/falcon_age.

character [L1]. Using VR, the player can direct the falcon to attack targets, hunt animals for food, take down drone-like robots, or distract land machines, making them vulnerable to the player's attacks [L2]. The designers chose a falcon as the player's companion intentionally, as falconry has been a cultural practice in many Middle Eastern and South Asian countries. UNESCO recognized falconry in 2021 as a practice of human heritage, commenting on the inscription with the following words: "while falconers come from different backgrounds, they share universal values, traditions and practices, including the methods of breeding, training and caring for birds, the equipment used and the bonds between the falconer and the bird."[379] *Falcon Age* contributes to this appreciation [S3].

With the falcon's help, Sarangerai escapes prison and finds her aunt. Though initially bitter and unpleasant, the aunt helps Sarangerai rediscover her identity after her time in prison (Figure 4.33). Thanks to the aunt, Sarangerai learns her real name, strengthens her bond with the falcon, and joins the resistance against the machines [L3, N3]. Her mission is to reclaim the colonized land, beginning with the destruction of a refinery that has polluted the Indian land for years. As she accomplishes this task, Sarangerai assists resistance fighters in restoring life to the wasteland by planting and nurturing vegetation. With the Company responsible for disastrous environmental changes, Sarangerai has much work ahead [L3].

In the later part of the game, Ekanayake and Jayanth introduce a dramatic twist. Sarangerai's mother, Amma, is revealed to be an employee of the Outer Loop Company. Possibly brainwashed, Amma tries to sway Sarangerai to join her side, tempting her with a smartphone and various (likely digital) pets besides the falcon. Although the player can choose to return to the Company, Amma's efforts seem unconvincing. Throughout the game, Sarangerai encounters numerous non-player characters united against the Company. Her aunt, the rebellion leader, is even willing to pass leadership to the protagonist. Near the end, the aunt shares a story about the conflict that resonates with many colonized nations [S4]:

> The ORC had more fire power than us. Each time we attempted to raise a rebellion,
> they would gun us down. But this only made the population angrier, more willing
> to give up their lives so that future generations could be free. I can only assume our
> enemies came to realize this too. So, the very last time we tried to fight, they chose
> a different tactic. Instead of sending soldiers, they turned off the water filtration
> systems, took away the medicine, and cut off our food supplies. All they had to do

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[379]  "Falconry, a Living Human Heritage" (UNESCO, 2021), https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/falconry-a-living-human-heritage-01708.

after that was wait. It is very hard to be strong when your family is dying around you [S2].

Nevertheless, surrendering and losing hope is not recommended. As one Indian non-player character remarks when told that plans to restore green life in the game world seem overly optimistic: "Maybe. But fatalism is how they got you" [S2]. To survive, as *Falcon Age* asserts, one needs hope even in the most challenging times [S4].

### 4.5.8  *Sable* (2021)



Figure 4.34: Screenshot from *Sable* (Shedworks, 2021), depicting the cel-shaded graphics and omnipresent desert landscape.

Following *Falcon Age*, Jayanth contributed to another project resonating with her life, echoing renowned philosopher Rosi Braidotti's concept of nomadism. In *Sable*, developed by London-based Shedworks Digital Limited, Jayanth served as a narrative designer. Kim Belair and David Bédard handled the writing, while Greek developer Ioannis Pitsikalis acted as the lead designer.

During development, Jayanth described *Sable* as a project combining elements of speculative fiction and the ancient world. Set in a canyon desert filled with ruins of bygone civilizations, the game depicts humans living in tribes that are far from "primitive," using fuel-propelled bikes to traverse the desert. As Jayanth observed, "we all live in a culture that is simultaneously futuristic and ancient."[380] Thus, *Sable*'s world is an eclectic blend of influences. *Vice*'s Darran Anderson stated that the game features references to:

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[380]  Darran Anderson, "How the Devs Behind 'Sable' Found Inspiration in the Enigmatic" (Vice, May 7, 2019), https://www.vice.com/en/article/neazk8/how-the-devs-behind-sable-found-inspiration-in-the-enigmatic.

the clean line fantasia-style of the French comic book artist Moebius, the light trail motion of *Akira*, the real-life stone ruins of Khmer, Egyptian, and Mesoamerican civilisations, and the eerie immersive environments of games from *Another World* to *Journey*.[381]

Other interpretations of *Sable* draw comparisons to Studio Ghibli films or even George Lucas' *Star Wars*[382] [M5]. However, the most fitting references are to *Another World* and *Journey*. Éric Chahi's *Another World* is a masterful autobiographical work in which the alternative reality, primarily rocks and deserts, served as self-therapy for its sole creator, whose father was Kabyle.[383] Consequently, Chahi's character is forced out of his comfort zone to explore a more dangerous world—but strangely, the only one where he finds a friend.[384] In contrast, thatgamecompany's Journey, developed under the guidance of Chinese-American Jenova Chen, focuses on an intentionally lengthy, nomadic journey, which felt "more Asian" to American audiences.[385]

Jayanth's contribution to *Sable* encompasses both autobiographical references and Asian-like topography [N1]. The game follows the teenage character Sable, whose tribe, the Ibexii, prepares her for a rite of passage [N3]. Under her mentor Jadi's guidance, Sable acquires new abilities, such as Gliding (a quasi-magical ability to float in the air) and receives a long-awaited bike [L2]. However, her tribe's motivations initially remain unclear. As the Ibexii prepare to move from their nomadic tent, Sable must act independently, having been trained as a Machinist. Machinists, according to Sable's first-person narration throughout the game, "are given their posts, and by their training and their code, must go to where they are needed" [S2].

Sable remains uncertain about why she must wander the desert. One certainty is that the game *Sable* does not dictate the pace of the journey or the story [L5]. In a self-referential manner, another tribe member, Hilal, tells Sable that "there world's an easier place if you put joy first" [S2]. Indeed, both the game and the tribe's life are casual. Sable explains that her role as a Machinist results from their nomadic nature, stating: "we seek to know who will travel with us,

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381   Ibid.
382   Emma Kent, "Behind Sable's Many Masks: Identity and Storytelling in a Sci-Fi Desert" (Eurogamer.net, January 28, 2019), https://www.eurogamer.net/unmasking-sable-character-identity-and-storytelling-in-a-sci-fi-desert.
383   Ichbiah, *Éric Chahi*, 10.
384   Filip Jankowski, "Inny świat, inny twórca. Another World Érica Chahiego jako przypowieść o Twarzy," *Homo Ludens*, no. 1, 11 (2019): 110–11, https://doi.org/10.14746/hl.2018.11.6.
385   Wayne Santos, "Journey – It's All About That First Step" (Computer Games Magazine, November 7, 2011), https://www.cgmagonline.com/articles/features/journey-its-all-about-that-first-step/.

and who we must leave behind, but all are welcome to join" [S2]. This statement reflects Rosi Braidotti's concept of nomadic subjects. As Braidotti emphasizes, a nomadic subject's life involves "blurring boundaries without burning bridges."[386] The in-game Ibexii tribe welcomes and bids farewell to anyone who joins or leaves them, challenging the stereotype of nomads as particularist barbarians. Moreover, while not all travelers are nomads,

> the nomad's identity consists in memorizing oral poetry, which is an elaborate and accurate description of the territories that need to be crossed in the nomad's never-ending journey. A totemic geography marks this sort of identity. The desert is a gigantic map of signs for those who know how to read them, for those who can sing their way through the wilderness.[387]

*Sable*'s world is indeed a desert and "a gigantic map of signs" as well (see Figure 4.34). Not coincidentally, the so-called Cartographers play a crucial role in deciphering this map. In *Sable*, Cartographers are characters who survey the desert from canyon tops and record their observations on map pieces. To obtain these pieces, players must find and sell rare items such as chum eggs and chalk butterflies [L2]. Abilities like gliding or climbing rocks help Sable locate these items. Additionally, by completing tasks assigned by other characters, players receive badges and new masks, rewarding their time spent wandering the desert and climbing peaks [L3].

Upon offering all the collected items at a mystical temple in the Watch, Sable gains access to a visualization of planets orbiting the sun [L4]. She then reflects: "As I focus on each element of this complex visualisation, I realize that there is something being imparted to me—that I am *reading* and *understanding* things" [S2]. Sable interprets the game space as "a gigantic map of signs" (to use Braidotti's term). However, Sable does not keep the knowledge to herself. In the final quest, the protagonist sacrifices her last mask and rejoins the Ibexii tribe, expressing gratitude to the people who supported her in gaining worldly knowledge [L4, N4].

### 4.5.9  Meg Jayanth as an Autrice

The research above proved that Jayanth is a "shy decision-maker" autrice. Her most personal work, *Samsara*, is the only game she wrote and directed herself. The rest of her output consists

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[386]  Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5.

[387]  Ibid., 17.

of either major writing (*80 Days*, *Falcon Age*, *Sable*) or additional writing (*Sunless Sea*, *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, *Sunless Skies*) for projects involving larger teams. Nonetheless, Jayanth's works convey a coherent, intrinsic meaning.

1. **Appraisal of tribalism**. Many games co-written by Jayanth (*Horizon*, *Falcon Age*, *Sable*) revolve around tribes. Their members restrict the use of technology to situations where it aids tribal communities' survival—nothing more, nothing less. When technology is employed in Jayanth's game worlds for military purposes, it quickly becomes a tool to repress colonized people (*Falcon Age*) or signifies humanity's end (*Horizon*).

2. **The nomadic mechanics**. Numerous games involve movement-based mechanics, but in Jayanth's titles, nomadism becomes the central theme of her oeuvre. Nomadism manifests in extended and disorienting travels around the Earth (*80 Days*) and prolonged, disorienting explorations of unknown fictional lands (*Sunless Skies*, *Sunless Sea*). Wandering from one town to another town (*80 Days*), from one settlement to another settlement (*Sunless Sea*, *Sunless Skies*), from one tribe to another tribe (*Horizon*, *Sable*), the player often does not know their destination. However, the destination lies in between, during conversations with others who provide the necessary knowledge to proceed.

3. **Eco-feminism**. Jayanth's contributions primarily consist of games that express the need to maintain a balance between nature and technology. Moreover, they posit female characters as defenders of nature and their local communities. Meanwhile, males either appear as irresponsible machos (Helis in *Horizon*) or as females' abusers (the Nawab in *Samsara*, King Leopold in *Sunless Sea*). While some female non-player characters also submit to colonial powers (*Falcon Age*'s Amma may serve as an example), females generally represent progressive individuals trying to save the world, not destroy it.

4. **Social constructionism**. To empower female characters to change the world, Jayanth creates positive models for female gaming audiences. *80 Days*, where the 19th-century world is transformed to include more female inventors, is the most evident example. However, other titles co-created by Jayanth, using speculative fiction aesthetics, transcend the pervasive real-life misogyny. They demonstrate that females around the world can have the power to make the world better, even if they do not yet.

5. **Characters of unstable identities**. Games contributed by Jayanth have characters whose identities gradually reveal themselves through gameplay. For example, the fracture of subjectivity is evident in *Sunless Sea* and *Sunless Skies*, where playable characters carry only a portion of their deceased predecessors' experiences. Similarly, the player's

decisions in *Samsara* and *80 Days* affect the sexual preferences, personalities, and abilities of main characters.

# Results and Conclusion

The intersectional approach was crucial for this dissertation's thought process. While authorial discourse in digital games typically focuses on white males, this thesis shifted attention to female creators who faced more significant obstacles in their careers. They were ridiculed in the gaming press (Muriel Tramis), faced workplace vilification (Meg Jayanth), encountered political opposition (Elizabeth LaPensée), or coped with depression due to external factors (Christine Love). Factors such as gender, sexual identity, or ethnicity contributed to their (whether direct or indirect) discrimination. Using Astrid Ensslin's theoretical framework, I aimed to demonstrate that females can also be auteurs/autrices and highlight their subjectivity. After all, the discourse around auteurs cannot remain in the "safe" space populated by well-known white cis-gender males like Peter Molyneux, Sid Meier, or David Cage. The analyses of works contributed by Muriel Tramis, Elizabeth LaPensée, Christine Love, and Meg Jayanth showcased the practical application of auteur theory through an intersectional lens.

Astrid Ensslin's functional ludostylistics, albeit slightly modified in this dissertation, played a vital role in the analyses above. Since digital games can be interpreted in various ways (as ludic artefacts, stories, persuasive tools, and/or platform-conditioned media), Ensslin's theoretical framework enables in-depth studies on auteurism in games. The auteur category can manifest in game mechanics, narrative content, ideological or even political messages, or media experiments. For these reasons, Kania's typology of authorial discourses, adapted by myself, can be combined with Ensslin's functional ludostylistics, as demonstrated in this dissertation. The method I devised allows for revealing the suggested presence of auteurs/autrices in various productions, ranging from self-made games to AAA titles.

Although Ensslin's four components complement each other during game analysis, their mutual importance depends on the types of auteurs/autrices. For example, digital artisans' output is primarily personal, and their games warrant research on ludosemiotic and mediatic components (as digital artisans are more likely to incorporate procedural rhetorics in their games and wrestle with their platforms' technological constraints). Meanwhile, digital orators

excel in procedural rhetorics mediated by engaging gameplay; therefore, studying the ludic and ludosemiotic components is essential for understanding digital orators' games. Finally, visionaries (and shy decision-makers directed by visionaries) focus on sophisticated narratives, making the ludonarratological component crucial during analysis. Consider the specific examples of autrices: Tramis (emphasis on elaborate narratives), LaPensée (post-colonial rhetorics embedded in well-known game mechanics), Love (one-person-made, intersectional-feminist pixel art or Ren'Py games), and Jayanth (primarily collaboratively-made game narratives focusing on self-exploration).

Regarding the auteur theory, the creative output of each developer examined above demonstrates reasonable consistency in their works, despite occupying various roles and working primarily for different studios. As a designer, producer, and writer, Tramis frequently provided substantial criticism of colonialism experienced by her ancestors; her games often feature sophisticated puzzles. I refer to her as a visionary, as Tramis was a project manager for numerous titles published by Coktel Vision. LaPensée, working as a writer and programmer, shared Tramis's critique of colonialism. However, LaPensée enriched her games with procedural rhetoric; her games are simple but have strong ideological messages embedded in the programming code. Thus, LaPensée can be called a digital orator. Christine Love, in contrast, wrote and programmed most of her games independently (hence, I refer to her as a digital artisan). Moreover, Love blended elements of Japanese visual novels with explicit intersectional feminism and queer theory in her games. Finally, although rarely the leading creator of the games she contributed to, Meg Jayanth consistently highlighted common personal motives in her works: eco-feminism, social constructionism, and a nomadic way of living. Therefore, she is a shy decision-maker.

Personal motives in Tramis, LaPensée, Love and Jayanth's titles are emphasized by two key factors: authorial signatures and autobiographical elements. Tramis placed her avatar in *Méwilo*; characters resembling Love appear in *Digital* and *Don't take it personally, babe, it just ain't your story*; Jayanth introduced her avatars in *Sunless Sea* and *80 Days*. All indicated developers created some games with their communities in mind: Tramis's *Méwilo* targets Martinican audiences; LaPensée aimed to preserve Anishinaabe culture in many digital games; Love based *Get in the Car* on her real-life experiences; Jayanth recounted her experiences of detachment as a British-Indian, influencing works like *Sunless Skies* and *Falcon Age*. Notably, all these game developers favored the indie gaming niche. Love produced most of her titles within her development studio Love Conquers All Games; LaPensée primarily developed her games

for educational purposes, funded by state institutions. Tramis, at least until Coktel Vision's 1992 takeover by Sierra On-Line, had considerable freedom of expression, and her pivotal post-colonial titles were intended for Afro-Caribbean audiences for educational purposes. Even Jayanth, who participated in the production of some AAA games (such as *Horizon*), primarily created scripts for indie developers. Love and LaPensée particularly benefited from tools that facilitated game creation for small groups or individuals (e.g., Ren'Py) and distribution (e.g., itch.io). Without these tools, the re-emancipation of females in the gaming industry over the past decade would have been challenging, if not impossible.

Since their games were mainly destined for niche audiences, all mentioned autrices had limited funds or creative possibilities at their disposal. However, they overcame technological or economical constraints by relying more on textual means of expression than on images or video sequences. Video game creation involves constant struggles with software, hardware, and dominant ideologies; hence, Tramis, Jayanth, LaPensée, and Love expressed their ideas through the most creatively accessible modality—text—and did so successfully. Nevertheless, these autrices were not afraid of narrative experiments, such as incorporating full-motion videos (Tramis), rewriting well-known gaming and literary classics with a postcolonial perspective (LaPensée), or employing meta-commentary on digital surveillance and game conventions (Love).

Undoubtedly, personal or autobiographical themes do not preclude collaboration with other developers. Tramis excelled at co-designing games with creators such as Patrick Chamoiseau and Pierre Gilhodes. LaPensée collaborated with various state institutions, while Jayanth worked with renowned novelists like Emily Short and Cassandre Khaw. Digital games are undoubtedly collective works. However, the slightly enhanced typology of authorial discourses, compared to Kania's, can help reconstruct the category of auteur/autrice in other contexts. Auteurs/autrices can also be identified among other designers, writers, programmers, and directors. I am not advocating for a return to the mindless "politique des auteurs" practiced by *Cahiers du cinéma*, but rather acknowledging multiple authors' contributions to specific works. Auteurs/autrices may be dispersed among various games and roles, but they still exist within that dispersion. Furthermore, game scholars can identify these developers within the industry and demonstrate that they have a voice and can articulate it, even though their work is anonymized by digital game companies.

Admittedly, the research I conducted could be more extensive in scope. I intentionally did not focus on Anglo-American female designers who have been relatively rediscovered and

warrant separate publications. Following GamerGate, figures such as Roberta Williams, Emily Short, Jane Jensen, and Amy Hennig have been well-represented in the gaming press. Instead, I aimed to showcase the cultural diversity of females in the gaming industry. In response to Demirbaş's words, I argue that we cannot be content with finding our Hitchcocks. We, as game scholars, should seek the gaming equivalents of Chantal Akerman, Agnès Varda, Sofia Coppola, Céline Sciamma, or Chloé Zhao. The real work is both in promoting female designers to auteur status *and* creating literature around them. Therefore, the hybrid use of an intersectional framework and functional ludostylistics is recommended to rehabilitate the auteur category and the auteur theory itself. I hope that this dissertation provides a methodological tool applicable to further research on intersectionality, or at least intersectional feminism. In today's social reality, intersectional research on game autrices is a necessity and becomes a politically significant statement needed to empower females working in the game industry.

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