

THE REVOLUTIONARY POTENTIAL OF INDEPENDENT VIDEO GAMES

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Art, Literature, and Contemporary European Thought

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Introduction

The definition of ‘video games’ has been hotly debated and contested since their creation - in this way, they are no different from any other human art form. In his book *The Art of Video Games*, media scholar Grant Tavinor characterizes video games as “interactive fictions.”¹ There are two facets of this definition which require specific understanding. First, the word ‘interactive:’ this means that the audience or player of a video game communicates with a fictive scenario, whether it be a narrative or a form of physical simulation. This could take the form of clicking through web pages with a computer mouse. It could also mean performing a series of actions by pressing buttons on a controller in a certain order. In video games, some sort of transaction or communion with the player and the environment of the game takes place. The second crucial point of this definition is the word ‘fictions.’ Although this word is often used interchangeably with the word ‘narrative’ in modern game literature, there is an important distinction between the two that must be clarified. ‘Fictions’ as a category may include narratives, but this includes other constructions, from flight simulators to the landscapes created with virtual reality technology. For the purposes of this paper, I will be utilizing Tavinor’s definition of video games when I refer to specific examples and the medium as a whole.

Another crucial contextualization of ensuing analysis is the interpretation of the difference between what is deemed ‘mainstream’ video games and ‘independent’ video games. The comparison can be understood as a parallel between mainstream and independent cinema. Mainstream video games are widely known, discussed, and played by the masses. Importantly, these games are commodified. Scholar Aaron Smuts explains that mainstream games “like other

¹ Tavinor, Grant. *The Art of Videogames*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

mass art forms, are the subject of popular aesthetic evaluation.”² These games dominate sales charts. Similar to popular films, mainstream games are games that developers and producers will readily spend money to create. Games that are considered mainstream are usually not incredibly difficult to play. The player makes choices that often lead them to immediate successes.³ Commonly, action shooters and real-time strategy games are considered mainstream. Examples include *Call of Duty*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Overwatch*, and *Super Mario Bros*.

On the other hand, ‘independent’ video games reference games “created by a single or small group of individuals, without significant support from a video game publisher.”⁴ These games do not exist as popular commodities. Independent game artists often have more room to experiment and personalize the medium of computer code. They manipulate the commonly held characteristics of popular video games in new ways.⁵ For example, while in mainstream games the player expects to make choices and reach immediate gratification or success, independent game artists may subvert this expectation by altering the system of rewards or abolishing it all together. In other words, there are some independent video games that are impossible to win, or take the form of exploratory narratives without any clear objectives.

Independent video games possess strong revolutionary potential - meaning the capacity to develop an understanding of viewpoints that counter oppressive societal models supported by a dominantly white and aged bourgeoisie. Independent video games have the ability to disseminate

² Smuts, Aaron. “Are Video Games Art?” *Contemporary Aesthetics* 3, (2005).

<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7523862.0003.006>

³ “QOTW: What Makes Games Mainstream?” GameSpot, May 12, 2006.

<https://www.gamespot.com/articles/qotw-what-makes-games-mainstream/1100-2784745/>.

⁴ “What Is an Indie Game?” Computer Hope, April 26, 2017.

<https://www.computerhope.com/jargon/i/indie-game.htm>.

⁵ Baker, Tabitha. “The Complete History of Indie Games.” The Indie Game Website, October 19, 2018. <https://www.indiegamewebsite.com/2018/10/19/the-complete-history-of-indie-games/>.

counter-bourgeois ideals to a wide audience, and to place a player in the shoes of an oppressed individual. These video games are the best example of a socially and politically effective medium of artistic production.

I intend to contextualize my broader argument with an overview of the state of popular video games today through the lens of Walter Benjamin's media theory and Nietzschean 'drive' concepts. I will then introduce Guy Debord's theory of the "dérive" and Jacques Rancière's theory of the emancipated spectator as two frameworks with which to explore the revolutionary potential of independent video games. I will conclude with analyses on the artistic quality of independent games in terms of rhythm and artistic control, with final reflections on the state of independent games today and in the future.

Popular Opinions of Video Games Today

Now that these definitions are established, it is possible to illuminate the state of video games as a medium in the public eye today. Because the majority of the public are familiar with video games only in the context of mainstream games, the powerful artistic potential of video games as a medium is disregarded from two sides. Video games are typically looked down upon from critics of the 'art world' - a body that is traditionally too high brow to consider video games as art.

Historically, these critics belong to a community heavily influenced by classism. They are often older white males who condescend on what they believe is 'low' media: media that is popular among the masses. British art critic Jonathon Jones provides a good example of the supercilious viewpoint taken by high-brow art commentators: "There needs to be a word for the

overly serious and reverent praise of digital games by individuals or institutions who are almost certainly too old, too intellectual and too dignified to really be playing at this stuff.” Jones goes on to say that “the worlds created by electronic games are more like playgrounds.” He paints a wide picture of video games as an incredibly juvenile medium, solely meant to distract and entertain the masses. Since mainstream video games fall into the category of ‘mass media,’ they are disregarded by the hegemonic community of the art world. Many of these high-brow critics, including Jones, do not regard video games as an art form at all. Because games rely on an exchange of responsibility between the creator and the player, many critics hold the perspective that since “The player cannot claim to impose a personal vision of life on the game, while the creator of the game has ceded that responsibility. No one "owns" the game, so there is no artist, and therefore no work of art.”⁶

However, games scholars and a growing faction of the art community view this opinion as condescending and out of touch. Matt Adams, co-founder of an interactive art collector responds directly to Jones’s argument, comparing it to critics against Duchamp’s *Urinal* or Carl Ander’s *Equivalent VIII*. Adams asserts that those critics also held that the works made were not true acts of personal imagination, for they were just objects that the artists did not own themselves. However, Adams explains that it is overly-simplistic to believe that is the character the production of a work of art that makes it effective. He highlights the fact that much of contemporary visual art is made by teams composed of technicians and assistants, while many games are driven by the vision of a single game designer. Adams says, “games connoisseurs

⁶ Jones, Jonathan. “Sorry MoMA, Video Games Are Not Art.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, November 30, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2012/nov/30/moma-video-games-art>.

would know a Miyamoto from a Wright in a heartbeat.”⁷ This directly contradicts Jones’ claim that video games lack a singular artist and therefore do not qualify as art.

Games scholars assert that at the base of art criticism, “certain critics will always attempt to barricade themselves against the flood of the new, to fence in what they understand and can safely ascribe meaning to – but new art always seeps through.”⁸ While it is not the purpose of this analysis to prove that video games are an art form, it is important to note the incredibly dismissive view held by many modern art critics toward the medium, and the overwhelming contrary response from a growing community of games scholars and enthusiasts.

While mainstream games have received this criticism from high-brow commentators, they have simultaneously been shunned from revolutionary art communities as well. Georgetown games scholars Bonnie Ruberg and Amanda Phillips elaborate: “It is crucial to resist games themselves, at least as we know them today: the ways they have commonly hailed, the problematic politics and values they often embody.”⁹ Ruberg and Phillips highlight an overwhelming and troubling trend within the mainstream gaming community of supporting dominating hegemonic powers by remaining unwelcoming to minority groups. They assert that

⁷ Stuart, Keith. “Are Video Games Art: the Debate That Shouldn’t Be.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, December 6, 2012.

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2012/dec/06/video-games-as-art>.

⁸ Stuart, Keith. “Are Video Games Art: the Debate That Shouldn’t Be.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, December 6, 2012.

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2012/dec/06/video-games-as-art>.

⁹ Ruberg, Bonnie, and Amanda Phillips. “Game Studies.” *Game Studies - Special Issue -- Queerness and Video Games Not Gay as in Happy: Queer Resistance and Video Games* (Introduction). Accessed November 21, 2019.

http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg.

“both historically and in the present day, video games as a medium and an industry have been aligned with the forces of hegemony and empire.”¹⁰

This interpretation of mainstream video games is evidenced by the feminist discourse around “toxic game culture”, a popular term to describe the offensive harassment and abuse perpetrated commonly by men in the gaming community. It is nearly impossible to participate in live stream chat room discussions on most major gaming sites, for example, Twitch, without reading many LGBTQ or misogynist slurs.

Mainstream Video Games as Benjaminian “Distractions”

Many mainstream video games, such as Mario Kart or Minecraft, are not inherently violent, nor are they particularly controversial. However, they are still ever-intertwined with the capitalist ideals of mainstream game developers, and therefore, profit remains the most important goal of these mainstream games. On the other hand, many popular video games today have incredibly violent themes. It is not the aim of this analysis to perpetrate the idea that video games cause violence; on the contrary, they may only provide a proxy for people to act on subconscious violent drives. For these reasons, mainstream video games do not offer great revolutionary potential. These video games would fall into the category of “distractions” as defined by philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin.

Towards the end of his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin develops the term “distraction” to describe work in which “the distracted masses

¹⁰ Ruberg, Bonnie, and Amanda Phillips. “Game Studies.” *Game Studies - Special Issue -- Queerness and Video Games* Not Gay as in Happy: Queer Resistance and Video Games (Introduction). Accessed November 21, 2019. http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg.

absorb the work of art into themselves.” The characters of these works are determined by the goals of capitalists. Due to their aesthetic shock value, the viewers of these works are no longer critically-thinking examiners; they become absent-minded. Benjamin elaborates: “The masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration from the viewer. Distraction as provided by art presents a covert control of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception.” Apperception describes how a viewer makes sense of an idea by assimilating it into the body of knowledge they already possess. Benjamin believes that this process is hindered and controlled by distractions, which halt viewers’ critical thinking processes with their shock value. Benjamin writes, “Since, moreover, individuals are tempted to avoid such tasks, art will tackle the most difficult and most important ones where it is able to mobilize the masses.”¹¹ He believes that art should target the trend of apathy and distraction in viewers by provoking critical thought.

As viewers lose their critical focus, they are absorbed into the work of art. Going beyond philosophy, this phenomenon has scientific evidence as well. The Center on Media and Child Health even published data showing that 66% of children age 8-12 play on a gaming console for an average of 2 hours a day.¹² As mainstream video games “deal with competition and reward, which makes students come back over and over again,” giving mainstream video games a bit of an addictive quality strengthened by “bells, lights and sound displays” that trigger a neurological responses.¹³ When studying first person shooter games, scientist Maria Konnikova discovered

¹¹ Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, 1935.

¹² “Video Games.” CMCH. Accessed December 3, 2019. <https://cmch.tv/parents/video-games/>.

¹³ Macris, Richard. “Video Games Can Be Addictive, Distracting.” The Norwich Guidon, March 30, 2010.

<http://www.norwichguidon.com/news/view.php/550465/Video-games-can-be-addictive-distracting>.

that “as the environmental complexity, variety of opponents, and difficulty increased, the players’ faces registered greater positive emotion while their skin indicated increased arousal.”¹⁴

Furthermore, the artistic qualities of mainstream video games as well as their impressive character design and landscape animation, have come in contact with the objectives of capitalists, and therefore lost value according to Benjamin. The philosopher elaborates that distractions may have shock value that requires no attention from the viewer. Many mainstream video games exhibit this, for they are incredibly emotionally striking. They provoke an immediate response from the player, and many of them, though not all of them, are violent.

Mainstream Video Games Supporting Destructive Drives

Many mainstream video games are known for glorifying gruesome graphics of blood splatter and gun violence inflicted by the player.

These games can be viewed through the lens of Nietzschean ‘drives.’ In his book *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche draws back the curtain on what he calls the “rottenness of man.” He states, “I understand rottenness in the sense of *decadence*: my argument is that all the values on which mankind now fixes its highest aspirations are *decadence-values*.” When Nietzsche speaks of decadence, he does not refer to something necessarily extravagant, but related to decay. Decadence values promote societal decay, or decay of the human species as a whole. He states that existing moral and societal systems promote this decay by withholding essential truths about life: “Our weak, unmanly social concepts of good and evil... have finally weakened all bodies

¹⁴ “What Are The Five Most Addictive Video Games? - Addiction Center.” AddictionCenter, July 17, 2019. <https://www.addictioncenter.com/community/video-game-addiction/>.

and souls and snapped the self-reliant, independent, unprejudiced men, the pillars of a strong civilization.”¹⁵

Nietzsche believes that values of decadence have destroyed man’s driven men to prefer what is “injurious to them.” The moral and societal boundaries we have drawn around ourselves are merely facades supporting baseless values. This ideal led Nietzsche to be a philosopher most closely associated with nihilism - a repudiation of all the imposed objective order on society. Nihilism aims to expose these baseless values and lead to the collapse of meaning and purpose. It is a destructive force on reality.

Sigmund Freud later drew heavily on Nietzsche’s philosophies of nihilism and decadence. In Freudian psychoanalytic theory, the “death drive” describes an inner will towards death and destruction. Freud utilized this idea in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, stating that “a portion of the [death] instinct is diverted towards the external world and comes to light as an instinct of aggressiveness.” Freud believes that civilization “obtains mastery over the individual’s dangerous desire for aggression by... setting up an agency within him to watch over it.” Freud believes humans have created societies with distinct boundaries to control this drive towards destruction, and only allow it to rear its head at specific times.¹⁶

Many mainstream video games, particularly active shooter games, give their players the opportunity to exert the nihilistic drive towards destruction and death. For example, *Call of Duty* is one of the most widely known video game series of the modern era. However, the 2009 edition of the game, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, has been specifically criticized for its

¹⁵ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *ANTICHRIST*. Place of publication not identified: DOVER PUBNS, 2018.

¹⁶ Freud, Sigmund. “Civilization and Its Discontents (1930).” *PsycEXTRA Dataset*, 1971. <https://doi.org/10.1037/e417472005-550>.

commodification of the legacies of true, bloody, historical events. In one level, players are allowed to take part in a terroristic mass shooting in a Russian airport (refer to Appendix A).¹⁷ Although the event in the game is fictional, the level is eerily reminiscent of real terrorist attacks and is portrayed as realistically as possible.

In the level, titled *No Russian*, the player controls an undercover CIA agent who takes part in a mass shooting at a Moscow airport to gain the trust of a Russian terrorist group. At the end of the level, the terrorist leader kills the player's CIA agent in a bloody attack. The level is even preceded by a warning of "disturbing content which may offend some players." This level was censored in many international versions of the game, and was even removed entirely from the Russian versions.

The example of *No Russian* particularly showcases the drive towards destruction that is supported by a number of mainstream games. These inert drives can be acted upon through the video game world proxy. While a player would likely never commit violence in their real lives, mainstream games and levels like *No Russian* manipulate true, bloody historical events to provide entertainment and an opportunity for a player to imagine themselves perpetrating violence. Mainstream games such as *Call of Duty* exert psychological control over the masses by keeping them focused and pinned down by these nihilistic drives. These games profit and create entertainment out of the human impulse to destroy. Therefore, it is my opinion that they qualify as distractions and do not offer revolutionary artistic potential.

¹⁷ Smith, Ed. "There's No Reason for 'No Russian' to Exist in 'Modern Warfare 2'." *Vice*, March 4, 2017. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/4x44yp/theres-no-reason-for-no-russian-to-exist-in-modern-warfare-2.

The Contrary of Independent Video Games

Although some mainstream video games are nihilistic distractions, it is crucial that the medium of video games as a whole should not be disregarded. Ruberg and Phillips assert that independent “game makers, and game scholars... have used play to question dominant structures of power. Given the history surrounding games and games studies... it is particularly crucial to bring to the surface this undercurrent of resistance.”¹⁸ What Ruberg and Phillips term as “resistance” is the movement of independent game makers towards unconventional styles of narrative, player interaction, and design that overturn the traditional methods used in mainstream games.

I argue that because they subvert commonly held expectations of mainstream video games while remaining incredibly accessible to minority groups and public players, independent video games possess incredible artistic revolutionary potential.

While mainstream video games remain fairly accessible to a wide audience, many still require expensive consoles and individual game purchases to play. On the contrary, many independent games are even more accessible by remaining on the internet for anyone to play - all that is required is an internet connection. The majority of these games are available for free.

¹⁸ Ruberg, Bonnie, and Amanda Phillips. “Game Studies.” *Game Studies - Special Issue -- Queerness and Video Games* Not Gay as in Happy: Queer Resistance and Video Games (Introduction). Accessed November 21, 2019. http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg.

From the beginning of their creation, they are designed to play online rather than on consoles. Throughout their design, they are crafted without an investment in profit.

Independent video game artists use the same basic concepts of mainstream video games and manipulate them for entirely different purposes. For example, many independent games control systems of tasks and rewards so that it is impossible for the player to ‘win’ the game. This tactic is used to place players in compromising, frustrating positions - positions that are often occupied by minority groups in society that the traditional mainstream game community has overlooked. Independent games work to challenge existing hierarchical structures and they should not be ignored by revolutionary art communities or art critics.

Applying Guy Debord’s Theory of The Dérive to Independent Games

The revolutionary potential of independent video games can be better understood when examined through the lens of what French writer and revolutionary Guy Debord calls the “dérive”, or “drift.” In essence, the “dérive” describes the reframing of surroundings for revolutionary purposes. In the words of the researcher and architect Maria Flores, the “dérive” involves “playful and constructive behaviors and an awareness of psychogeographical effects.”¹⁹ Debord applies this to the context of modern urban spaces of the early 20th century, claiming that these cities had specific psychogeographical articulations. These spaces were designed to exert psychological control on their inhabitants - they are difficult to navigate naturally from within, but controlled by dominant classes from above.

¹⁹ Flores, Maria. “Theory of the Derive.” *The Archiologist*. *The Archiologist*, October 2, 2016. <https://thearchiologist.com/article/theory-of-the-derive>.

The avant-garde revolutionary group The Situationist International aimed to manipulate the same basic structure of these spaces and therefore reincorporate art into everyday life. These social revolutionaries aimed to create an extensive critique of 20th-century capitalism by incorporating politically subversive art into these urban spaces. The group manipulated existing structures for radically different purposes, therefore criticizing the bourgeois and their dictatorship of goods.²⁰

Independent video game artists can also be viewed as avant-garde revolutionaries. Similar to the Situationist International, independent game artists have manipulated the same basic tenets of video games - interactivity, systems of tasks and rewards, narrative and simulation - for radically different purposes than mainstream video games. Independent game artists subvert an audience's expectations of these systems and codes to propagate revolutionary ideals.

The work of transgender activist and independent game artist Anna Anthropy provides an example of this base code manipulation. In her game *Queers in Love at the End of the World*, she begins by presenting the player with a choice. "In the end, like you always said, it's just the two of you together. You have ten seconds, but there's so much you want to do: **kiss** her, **hold** her, **take** her hand, **tell** her." The player has ten seconds to make this choice, as indicated by a timer on the left hand side of the screen (refer to Appendix B). Depending on the choice the player makes, they are presented with another choice. For example, "You kiss her: **softly, slowly, fiercely, hungrily**". However, the timer is not reset, so the player has less time to make this choice. After clicking, the process repeats again with another question, but even less time to choose. Eventually, the player has so little time that they are unable to click an option before the

²⁰ Debord, Guy. "Writings from the Situationist International" May 17, 1961.

timer runs out. The player is presented with a screen that displays the text “Everything is wiped away” (refer to Appendix C).

No matter how many times a player repeatedly attempts this game, and no matter how fast they click through the pages, this result is inevitable. The game is impossible for a player to ‘win’, according to their traditional understanding. The game artist manipulates this players understanding that if they make proper choices at proper times, then their successes will be rewarded. This expectation is shattered, therefore placing the player in a position of confusion and frustration.

In the game, the player takes the position of a discriminated queer individual who is rejected and unable to be with the person they love in a simulated apocalypse. When coupled with the effect of frustration that comes along with the time constraints in the game, the player begins to identify even further with the queer individual’s position. The effect promotes awareness in the player of the frustrations that queer individuals may face in everyday life. A shared understanding of LGBTQ+ issues is fostered by imposing the pressure of time and choice on the player, two pressures that queer individuals often relate to greatly.

Anna Anthropy furthers her exploration of player exploration in her deeply personal narrative game, *Dys4ia*. The game takes a narrative form, recounting Anna’s experiences of gender dysmorphia and hormone replacement therapy. It documents a six-month treatment period through a series of mini-games. These smaller vignettes range over a wide variety of topics, including being misgendered by strangers, using a women’s restroom, being weighed at a clinic, and the effects of white privilege on hormone medical treatments (see Appendix J.)

Anna explains her manipulation of the games rules: “This was a story about frustration - in what other form do people complain as much about being frustrated? A video game lets you set up goals for the player and make her fail to achieve them. A reader can’t fail a book. It’s an entirely different level of empathy.”²¹ This frustration manifests itself through technical, mechanical restrictions. For example, the second mini-game is dictated by these rules: “Player can move in any (cardinal) direction. Player moves at a set velocity. Player can only move on the orange tiles (cannot move on or through NPCs, objects or walls). Player cannot interact with anything in the room. End state is triggered by the timer running out.”²² In one mini-game, the player is asked to navigate their way through a women’s bathroom while only being able to move themselves one tile at a time. Some levels are repeated chronologically throughout the game, before and after the character has received their hormone treatments. In the first iteration of these levels, the player is often permitted limited mobility. However, in the second iteration of the levels, after the character has transitioned, the character can actively affect the situation by moving more freely. This expresses the mental and physical freedom and comfort that a trans individual may feel after receiving validating hormone therapy. However, Anna is clear to express that psychological and societal discomforts exist before, during, and after the transition process. In one of the mini-games, the player is given absolutely no agency at all. They are asked to fit through a slot in the wall, but they are unable - this creates not only a sense of frustration, but suffocation and physical embarrassment.

²¹ Kuchera, Ben. “The Penny Arcade Report.” The PA Report - Dys4ia tackles gender politics, sense of self, and personal growth... on Newgrounds, March 16, 2012.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20120915095208/http://www.penny-arcade.com/report/editorial-article/dys4ia-tackles-gender-politics-sense-of-self-and-personal-growth-on-newg>.

²² “A Look At the Mechanics of Dys4ia.” Erika's Uni Blog, June 12, 2016.
<https://111426studio.wordpress.com/2016/06/12/a-look-at-the-mechanics-of-dys4ia/>.

Dys4ia has been highly celebrated in the independent game community for making such a painful, intimate experience so universally relatable. The frustration and discomfort evoked within the player through the game vignettes not only makes them aware of transgender issues, but makes them empathize. The effect created is not only mental, but also physical due to the specific manipulation of the players' mechanical limitations. Game writer Ben Kuchera states that "*Dys4ia* uses the vocabulary of video games in order to share emotions that may not have been as easily described in words." He explains how the moment in which the player attempts to fit their character through a slot in the wall is particularly effective. There is no physical reason that the character should not fit through the opening. There is no reasonable, mechanical explanation to explain this impossibility. Instead, it just seems to the player as if "it clearly wasn't designed for you... the structure isn't wrong, *you* are wrong." This experience communicates discomfort in a way that words may be difficult to understand or empathize with. It is an elegant method to convey the feeling of being extremely displeased and unwelcome within one's own body.²³

Dys4ia brings the "dérive" into a digital space. *The Situationist International* worked to free the oppressive physical structures in urban environments. On the other hand, Anthropy subverts a player's expectations so that the digital landscapes of a doctor's office, bathroom, or a simple slot in the wall exert a psychological and physical control on the player. Although this is an opposing force of motion, it is incredibly effective in creating awareness and empathy

²³ Kuchera, Ben. "The Penny Arcade Report." The PA Report - *Dys4ia* tackles gender politics, sense of self, and personal growth... on Newgrounds, March 16, 2012.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20120915095208/http://www.penny-arcade.com/report/editorial-article/dys4ia-tackles-gender-politics-sense-of-self-and-personal-growth-on-newg>.

towards a group of marginalized people which may not exist in the gaming community otherwise.

Independent Video Games as an example of Rancière's *Emancipated Spectator*

The revolutionary potential of independent video games can also be realized in a different direction under French philosopher Jacques Rancière's theory of the "emancipated spectator." In his book *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière argues that modern audiences are aesthetically and politically passive. The philosopher believes that revolutionary power in art is undermined by the assumption that disturbing viewers with shock value will inspire them to change oppressive societal constructions. He believes that showing "a shock image that shows grotesque abuse," as may be seen in many mainstream violent video games, inspires responses of passivity and disgust in a viewer. Rancière proposes that in order to transform the spectator into an active agent, art must invite the spectator to contemplate and provoke conversation. He argues that emancipation of a viewer is only true emancipation if it is brought about by the thought and conversation of the viewer themselves - not by art that is created with the intent to shock. Powerful revolutionary art should invite viewers to witness the experience of another and form a conversation about this in an artistic community. Rancière elaborates: "this is what emancipation means: the blurring of the opposition between they who look and they who act, they who are individuals and they who are members of a collective body."²⁴

Rancière illustrates his theory of the emancipated spectator using the example of Alfredo Jaar's *Real Pictures* (see Appendix E.) Jaar's installation reflected his experience traveling to

²⁴ Rancière Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. London: Verso, 2011.

Rwanda, a nation ravaged by war and genocide. It contained many different materials, including photographs and testimonials from people who witnessed the death and destruction first hand. His intallation contained lined rows of portfolio boxes, each of which contained memorials from witnesses of the Rwandan genocide. Importantly, there were no blatant photographs of the violence, only the testimonials and eyes of the witnesses. The viewer was invited to imagine the image of death. The effect and power of this exhibition was only strengthened by the linear repetition of the black-linen boxes throughout the installation space.²⁵

Rancière stipulates that *Real Pictures* is a prime example of politically effective art. This piece prefers the virtue of testimony over photographic proof. This allows the viewer to overcome their passivity and alienation, for they are not forced into an immediate aesthetic reaction. Instead, they are invited to construct the significance of a mental image through speech, narrative, and labor of the true witness. The viewers political mental construction of the image allows for the formation of an ‘aesthetic community,’ one that is brought together to witness and deliberate. The viewer is now an active agent of this community and no longer a passive, apathetic observer.

Although Rancière defines this idea in the context of visual art and film, it is incredibly applicable to modern video games. Independent video game artists are especially apt at creating works that emancipate spectators (players) and transform them into active agents. They are able to do this by limiting or expanding the point of view of a player. This can invite the player to

²⁵ “Real Pictures: An Installation by Alfredo Jaar Jan 28 - Mar 25, 1995.” Real Pictures: An Installation by Alfredo Jaar | Museum of Contemporary Photography. Accessed December 4, 2019.
<https://www.mocp.org/exhibitions/1990/5/real-pictures--an-installation-by-alfredo-jaar.php>.

understand the experience of another in a way that they may not be able to explore through other artistic mediums.

The game *After Hours* was created by a group of students at the University of the Witwatersrand, and was awarded the Best Student Game Award at the 2019 Independent Game Awards. The game is centered around a woman named Lilith Gray, who suffered molestation and borderline personality disorder as a result. As the player begins to click through the game's pages, they are slowly given access to the voices inside of Lilith's head. The player spends a night with Lilith in her bedroom. Slowly, they begin to piece together Lilith's experience, and understand why she acts and responds the way she does (refer to Appendix Z).

Instead of applying shock material of the subject's abuse, or relaying horrifying first-hand accounts, this game effectively utilizes the interactivity of the video game medium to invite the player to witness Lilith's experience. The player clicks around their screen to explore Lilith's surroundings - reading her bedroom posters, journals, and even her Facebook wall. By piecing together these external details of the subject's environment, the player obtains a more full and rich understanding of Lilith's life and disorder than if they had just been relayed a gruesome account of her abuse.

After Hours has been praised for being a tactile way to grapple with and understand the struggles of people battling with mental illnesses, specifically borderline personality disorder. While the player may have no personal experience with this illness, they are able to witness how it affects Lilith's construction and interpretation of her surrounding environment. The player takes the role of both Lilith's friend and confidant, and also her internal mind. This game provokes conversation of shared experiences among players and creators, which led to its

eventual praise and the discussion of the game at the 2019 Independent Video Game Awards. The game provides the player with an experience that they are invited to contemplate on, therefore transforming the spectator of player from merely a passive viewer to an active agent of their community.

Rhythm and Control

Independent video game artists further revolutionary ideals and qualify themselves as great artists through their effective manipulation of rhythm and time.

Surrealist novelists of the 20th century were applauded for this exact mastery over narrative rhythm. For example, Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea* is one of his most acclaimed works and went on to become a pivotal text of the Surrealist movement. The novel is a free-association exploration of minute details which center the text. At times, Sartre falls into scenes pivoting around one small detail, which he expands upon for many pages. He departs from a traditional narrative style by freezing these moments in time, lengthening them so that they suspend for hours rather than minutes.

Simultaneously, Sartre juxtaposes these expanded scenes with other telegraphic, rapid sentences. Through this contrast, the novel is given its rhythm and tempo - through this, the text effectively captures the nature of true human existence. Humans experience the world not on a traditional linear narrative timeline, but through a rapidly changing tempo of attention to moments. The inner psychic times of a human subject is always changing pace; it is not the time of physics or science.

In this way, Sartre effectively deconstructs reality in his text. The inconsistent series of disruptive moments create the titular “nausea,” a physical symptom that occurs when the spectator has been frozen in a moment and is suddenly snapped back to the present. Zooming in and out with inconsistent rhythm disorients the reader while drawing attention to their methods of thinking in everyday life.

The reader becomes aware that their focus is constantly shifting, that the only thing truly present is their body itself. This phenomenon can be both psychologically and physically frustrating. This corporeal awareness leads a viewer to be acutely present in the world in a way that they were not previously. Consequently, this manipulation of rhythm can be effectively implemented as both an artistic and revolutionary tool.

Independent video game artists have successfully utilized this nonlinear experience to their work to draw attention to the experience of marginalized communities. For example, artist Robert Yang created his game, *The Tearoom*, in 2017 to highlight the oppressive constructions within the mainstream gaming community. One of Yang’s previous LGBTQ+ themed games had been banned from the popular mainstream game streaming platform, Twitch due to its “overt sexuality.” In protest, Yang created *The Tearoom*. In his artist statement, Yang teasingly but pointedly states: “To appease this oppressive conservative gamer-surveillance complex, I have swapped out any pesky penises in my game for *the only thing that the game industry will never moderate nor ban -- guns*. Now, there's nothing wrong with guys appreciating other guys' guns, right?”²⁶

²⁶ Yang, Robert. “The Tearoom by Robert Yang.” itch.io, June 29, 2017. <https://radiatoryang.itch.io/the-tearoom>.

The Tearoom is based around historical events which took place in 1962 in Mansfield, Ohio. Local police “setup a hidden surveillance camera behind a two-way mirror, and secretly filmed dudes having sex with dudes in a public bathroom. The police used the film footage to imprison them for a year or more under Ohio's sodomy laws.”²⁷

The Tearoom is a virtual simulator which takes place inside one of these 1960’s Ohio bathrooms. The player occupies the point of view of a man inside the graffitied bathroom. They see an icon that reads, “If you see the police, exit the game” (see Appendix F.) Other men eventually enter the simulated bathroom and use the urinal that they player stands next to. Then, the player can choose when to perform oral sex on the men’s guns - this is not a euphemism, the player can opt to lick the other mens weapons that they hold on their person (see Appendix G.) This lasts for an indeterminate amount of time, until the player is busted by the police (see Appendix H.)

The game places the viewer in the helpless position of a minority in 1962 while cleverly relating this to discrimination towards LGBTQ+ game artists in 2017, using the substitute of a gun for a male phallus. *The TeaRoom* is especially effective because it does not operate on a linear timeline that is forced on the player. Instead, the viewer basically creates the timeline himself, in relation to the obstacle of the approaching police force. This creates a nauseating rhythm that is only amplified by the threat of discovery and ostracization.

The TeaRoom should be praised as an example of a socially effective revolutionary game. The artist, through his masterful manipulation of time and environmental control, places the viewer in a position that they may not occupy in their everyday lives. By forcing them into this

²⁷ Yang, Robert. “The Tearoom by Robert Yang.” itch.io, June 29, 2017. <https://radiatoryang.itch.io/the-tearoom>.

nauseating rhythm, all under the threat of a police discovery, Yang encourages the player to consider the position of queer minorities not only in the 1960s but in modern day gaming communities that the player likely occupies. *The TeaRoom* not only advocates for LGBTQ rights, but also brings awareness to the double-standards of censorship within the mainstream gaming community. The experience of this game encourages education of queer history and action against the anti-queer policies of modern day police, and the policing of mainstream online groups as well.

Player Accessibility

In his essay “What is Revolutionary Art?” writer and philosopher Herbert Read boldly states that “REVOLUTIONARY ART IS CONSTRUCTIVE. REVOLUTIONARY ART IS INTERNATIONAL.”²⁸ I would like to bring focus on this important word: international. I believe that Read was proposing that one important feature of revolutionary art is that it reaches a wide variety of people not only geographically but societally. Revolutionary art does not only reach the traditional white bourgeois that encounters art exhibitions regularly.

I would go one step further than Read and claim that revolutionary art should be inherently accessible. While the word “accessibility” is thrown about frequently in a number of modern discourses, in this context, I use “accessible” to mean visible, usable, and understandable to anyone regardless of disability, race, identification, or social standing.

The biggest obstacle in front of revolutionary visual artists is the method of distributing their works to the masses. Yes, many of these works may hang in museums, but who gets to go

²⁸ Read, Herbert. “What Is Revolutionary Art?” *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, April 2018, 123–28. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429498909-22>.

into these museums? If the museum ticket costs money, a large part of the public is eliminated. Furthermore, people need free time to visit museums, which is unlikely if they are working multiple jobs or have a family to care for. Beyond that, people need to be provided with the educational tools to interpret the revolutionary messages and calls to action that are present in many modern artworks. It is this compilation of all barriers that is why the “art world” and the environment of art museums feels pretentious, condescending, and overall inaccessible to a large number of citizens.

These barriers however are removed when you shift to the realm of digital art, specifically, video games. These works don’t require money or travel towards museums, but are accessible from the home. And none are more accessible than independent video games.

Although mainstream video games are also accessed in the home, they still require a fairly large amount of expendable income to enjoy. Players need a gaming system, which cost hundreds of dollars, and the games themselves regularly cost sixty dollars a piece. On the other hand, independent video games do not require this type of monetary flexibility. Many independent video games are entirely free and accessible online on public streaming platforms or the artists’ personal websites. Every single independent game example cited so far in this analysis is entirely free to watch or download on the internet. All one needs to access these works of art are a computer, which can be utilized in many public facilities, and internet connection.

Reproducibility

Another important characteristic of independent video games is their inherent reproducibility. At their core, these games are lines of code that can be recreated on any computer at any time in any location.

Philosopher Walter Benjamin's views on reproducibility provide an interesting lens through which to view the ubiquity of independent video games. In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin states that "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." He emphasizes the importance of the context of creation to the spirit and value of an artwork. Benjamin believes that the uniqueness of a work of art is largely shaped by the history and developments that it is exposed to during its existence. He says that "the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity."²⁹ However, I believe that digital art and the modern medium of video games complicate Benjamin's views on reproducibility. Obviously these technologies did not exist in Benjamin's time, and it is not reasonable to transfer these standards from photography and film to video games.

On the contrary, I believe that more than any other medium, independent video games to have a unique presence in time and space. What makes their existence so individual is that the character and authenticity of independent games is molded not only by the creator but by the player of the game as well. Because video games are partly shaped by the player, they can have a number of unique outcomes and interpretations. This phenomenon further complicates Benjamin's assertions on reproducibility. While each of these video games may be infinitely

²⁹ Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", 1935.

reproducible lines of computer code, the experiences of the games cannot be copied. Because video games exist over time, and the player's active role affects how each game unfolds, these video games are not endlessly recreatable.

The reproducibility of independent games not only makes them accessible to a wider number of people, but also re-bestows power back in to the viewer's hands. This transfer of responsibility confirms the player as an active agent, therefore solidifying an independent game's potential to spur revolutionary action from the player.

Experimental Artist Accessibility

Furthermore, the independent game community has actively pushed against the game-keeping of content and subject matter that has been prevalent in the mainstream gaming community, as the example of Robert Yang's *TeaRoom* demonstrates. The independent game community is absolutely filled with content from a wide number of marginalized communities, as can be seen from the previous examples.

On one popular streaming platform for online games, itch.io, players can search for games categorized under hundreds of identifying tags. These tags include queer, transgender, female protagonist, gay, gender, lesbian, LGBT, LGBTQIA, mental health, nonviolent, and even non-euclidian. As evidenced by these tags, there are spaces on independent gaming sites where users can specifically search for games that they feel represent their community or reflect on their experience.

Not only are these independent gaming sites accessible to a wide range of users, they are also accessible to a wide range of artists. The artists can upload games to itch.io entirely for free. This is especially notable because historically, the financial burdens that accompany distribution

of artwork were barriers that hindered many artists from disseminating their work. Independent artists have the option to create a customized landing page for their users to see their game. They can even choose to set a minimum price for the game, which gives fans the opportunity to donate what they are able to the artist before they enjoy the game. Sites like itch.io provide independent artists with the tools to not only release their games, but also track games' reception and run promotions to make profit from their work. These tools are available on independent gaming sites for free, therefore opening the door for many artists to support themselves - an opportunity they may not have had access to otherwise.

The independent game community also does not scare away from new, experimental forms of gameplay that would never be seen in the mainstream community. This could mean a manipulation and incorporation of film or documentary aspects into a game, which is seen in *After Hours*. Or, it could be an adventurous incorporation of the written word, or the elimination of a rewards system altogether, which is seen in *Queers in Love at the End of the World*. By allowing artists to remain open about their methods of creation, and applauding those who think outside the box of traditional gaming expectations, the independent game community remains accessible not only to players, but also artists who do not fit into the video game mainstream.

One effective example of this bending of the medium is Angela Washko's *The Game: The Game*. This is a feminist independent video game that premiered in the form of a solo exhibition at the Museum of the Moving Image in New York City, although game play videos, stills, and exhibition views remain free for anyone to view online (refer to Appendix I). On Washko's personal website, *The Game: The Game* is described as a project that "presents an exploration of consent and the politics, tactics and practices of the male pick-up artist and

seduction community.” It takes the form of a dating simulator in a bar. Players are confronted by several seduction coaches, otherwise known as pick-up artists. The pick-up gurus attempt to seduce the player with tactics commonly written in seduction instructional books and video materials. Each coach vies for the players attention at one time. The player is given a limited amount of verbal responses to choose from. The techniques of the pick-up range in nature from fairly passive, to almost violent. They are forced to explore the complex world of dating while also inhabiting the body of a femme-presenting person in an often dangerous environment.³⁰

Angela Washko’s *The Game: The Game* is at times funny, and also incredibly alarming. By placing the player in the shoes of a femme-identifying individual, Washko unveils the nuances of a seemingly harmless night out at a bar. The techniques employed by the pick up artists are incredibly manipulative. The player is forced to tactically explore them and disarm them. Jason Appnick, Curator of Digital Medium at the Museum of the Moving Image elaborates: “It also makes you complicit in their frequently dehumanizing behavior: refusing their advances results in a brief game. Only by actively consenting to participate in your suitor’s methods—which can range from cheesy to violent—will you be able to more fully understand them.”³¹

The idea of a player being complicit in any sort of oppression is one that would only survive in the independent gaming community. In most mainstream games, the player is the eventually the winner - but Washko, along with other independent game artists, has entirely rebuilt the traditional gaming system of risks and rewards.

³⁰ “The Game: The Game.” ANGELA WASHKO. Accessed December 6, 2019. <https://angelawashko.com/section/437138-The-Game-The-Game.html>.

³¹ “The Game: The Game.” ANGELA WASHKO. Accessed December 6, 2019. <https://angelawashko.com/section/437138-The-Game-The-Game.html>.

The technical construction of the game as a whole is unique to the independent game community as well. *The Game: The Game* incorporates digital artwork in an incredibly unique simulator. Unlike mainstream video games, the player is given an incredibly limited range of physical motion and verbal response choices. Beyond this, the exhibition of the game at the Museum of the Moving Image was coupled with a visual mixed media series *Severed Women as Objects*. The juxtaposition of mediums and incorporation of physical artistic production further demonstrates the unique character of *The Game: The Game* in comparison to the mainstream gaming community.

The technical coding knowledge behind creating one of these video games may seem inaccessible and only available to artists who attend an upper-level school on the subject. However, because independent video games take so many forms, the code and technical work behind them can be as simple or complex as the artist wants. Many independent games are even coded an open-source software systems, like Processing, p5.js, or Python, which are available for free online. "Open-source" means that any computer user can access these base codes and modify them as they see fit to create moving graphics, word puzzles, clickable web page adventures - or anything they dream of.

Conclusion

Independent video games are an incredibly effective revolutionary medium of artistic production. Game artists within this community change the traditional expectations of video games to raise awareness of the plights of marginalized people. They utilize the incredibly unique video game medium to place a player in the shoes of these people, therefore making them

witness to their experience. The control of rhythm, mechanical capabilities, and accessibility elevates independent video games above traditional methods of revolutionary artistic production.

However, independent video games have yet to reach their true revolutionary potential. Despite their accessibility on the internet, they have yet to receive the attention from millions of people. This mass attention could have great revolutionary potential, however, independent game material is not often shown to the masses because only capitalistic mainstream video games are widely marketed. Furthermore, video games lack the support of both high-brow and revolutionary artistic communities, so their influence within niche creative circles is restricted as well.

In order for independent video games to reach their revolutionary potential, it is crucial that their medium is recognized and validated by these artistic communities. This is the first step towards disseminating independent game material to the general public. Digital art and interactive games must be included in museums that traditionally control what is considered worthy of artistic consideration. Revolutionary artists must expand their mediums to include video games or other digital works that are easily accessible online. The word “game” must cease to imply a juvenility. More than anything, it implies an active interaction between an artist and a viewer. This is a relationship that must be solidified and respected for revolutionary art to forge ahead into the future.

Appendixes

Appendix A



Fig. 1. *Call of Duty: No Russian*

Screenshot from Smith, Ed. "There's No Reason for 'No Russian' to Exist in 'Modern Warfare 2!'" *Vice*, March 4, 2017. Courtesy of Activision.

Appendix B

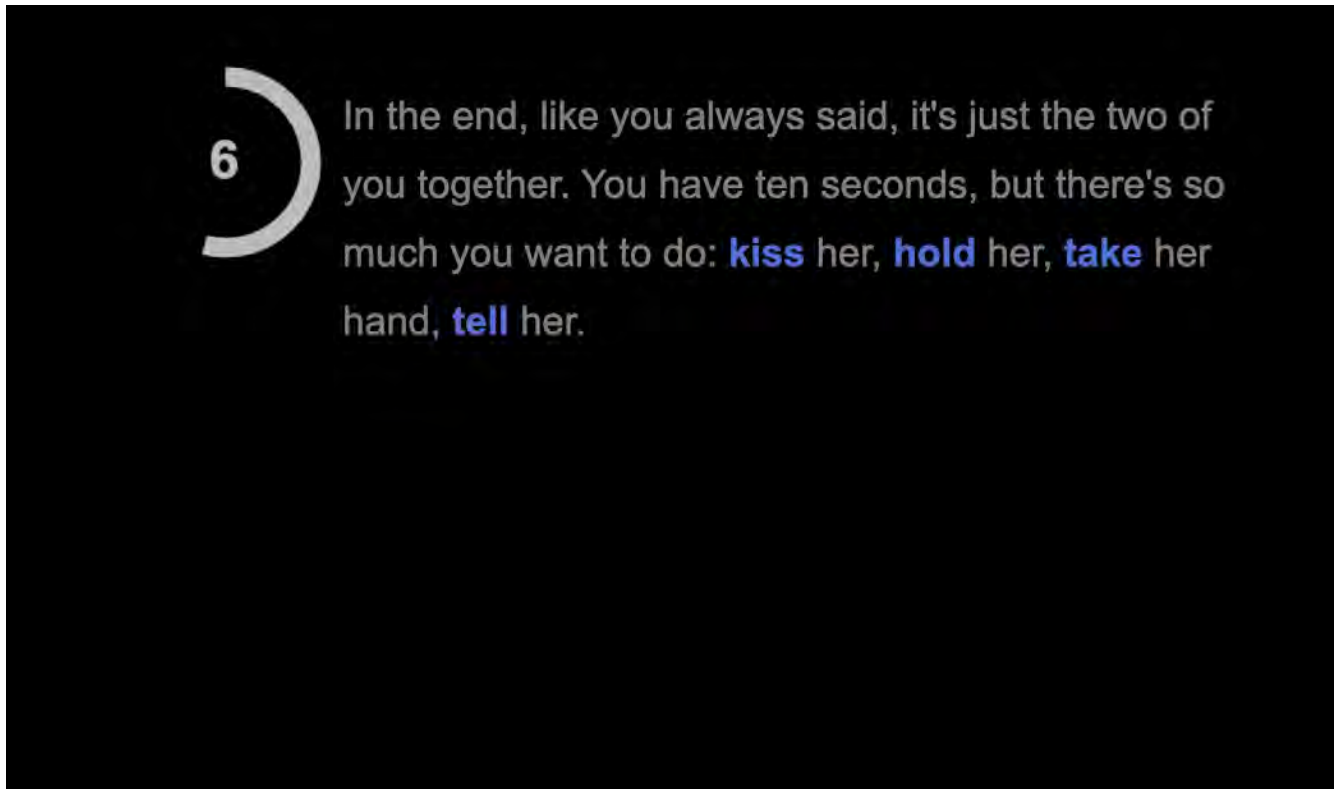


Fig. 2. Anna Anthropy, [*Queers in Love at the End of the World*](#)

Appendix C

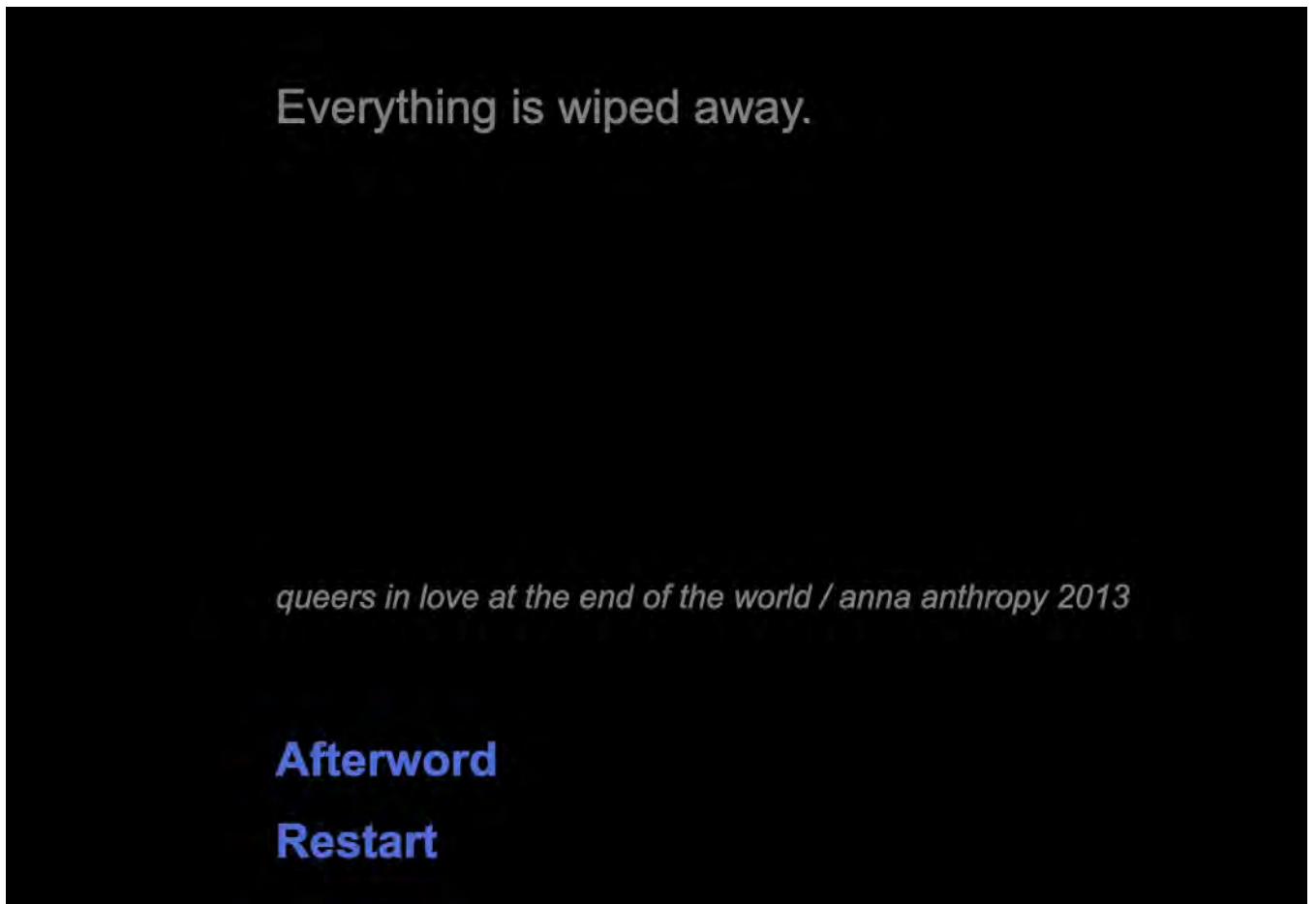


Fig. 3. Anna Anthropy, [*Queers in Love at the End of the World*](#)

Appendix D

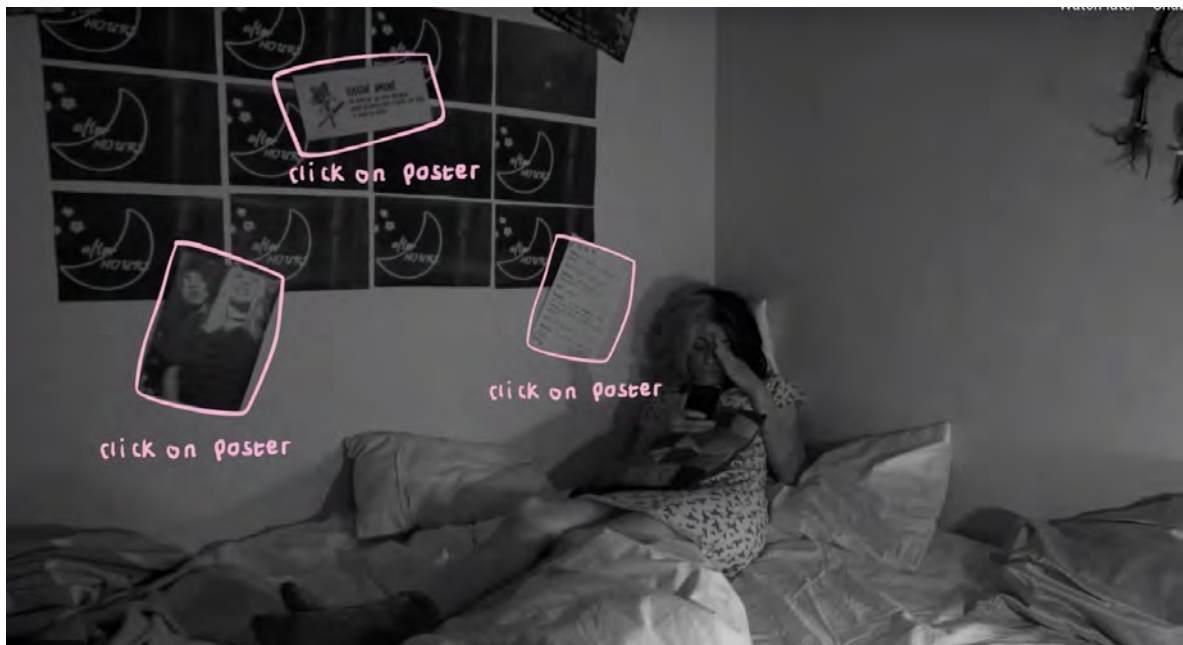




Fig. 4. *After Hours*, screenshots from [After Hours Trailer](#)

Appendix E



Fig. 5. Alfredo Jaar, *Real Pictures* (1995)

Appendix F



Fig. 6. Robert Yang, *The Tearoom Trailer* (2017)

Appendix G



Fig. 7. Robert Yang, *The Tearoom Trailer* (2017)

Appendix H



Fig. 8. Robert Yang, *The Tearoom Trailer* (2017)

Appendix I



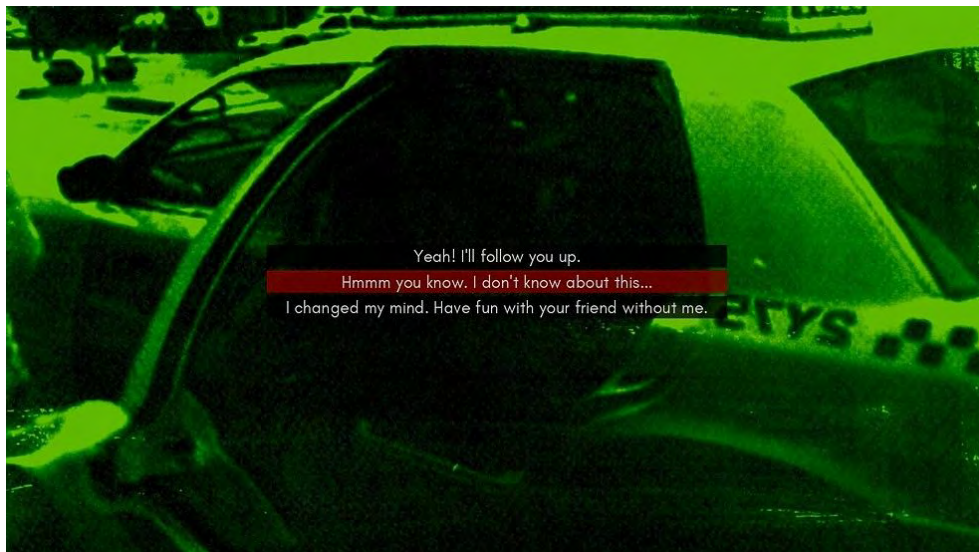
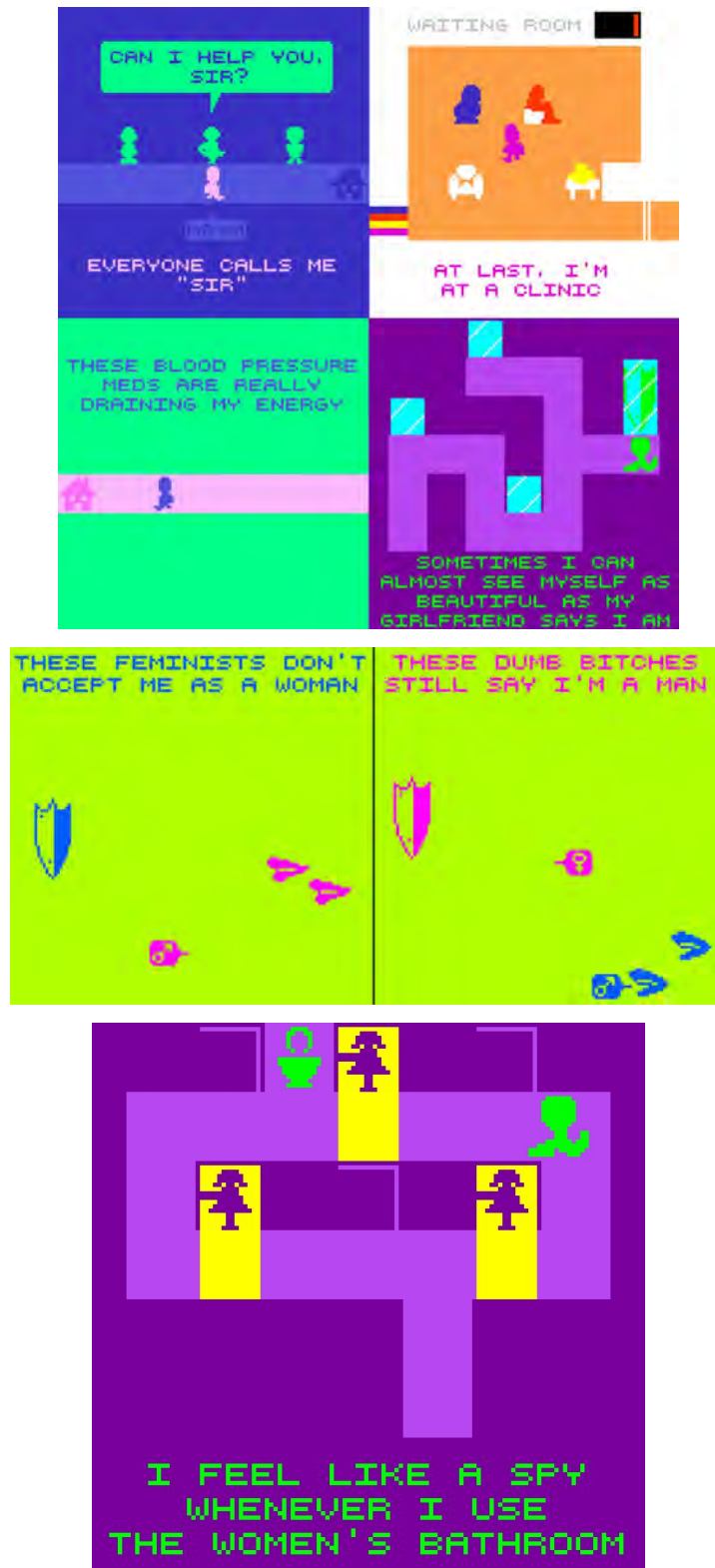


Fig. 9. Angela Washko, *The Game: The Game*(2017)

Appendix J

Fig. 10. Anna Anthropy, *Dys4ia*, 2012

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