CHAPTER T-5

Twine and the Critical Moment

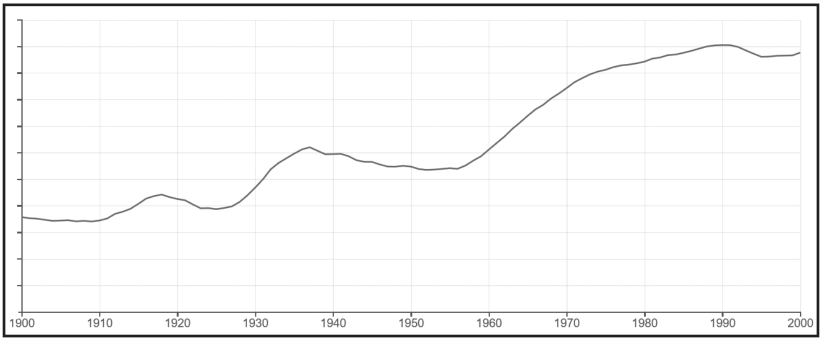

Figure 22: The previous century explained

What Crisis?

Centuries leave marks, such as the interesting signature of the twentieth century shown here. Despite its generally upward trend, this is not a world population graph, whose roughly 6:1 slope would be considerably steeper than the present line and whose curvature would be much more acute. A closer guess might be something like the gross domestic product for an industrialized nation, or perhaps the Dow Jones index—though, on closer inspection, we’d expect a sag around

1930, not the rise we see here. The steady ascent in the latter half of the graph looks familiar, though again the flattening after 1990 is at odds with the economic record.

The data mapped here are not financial but linguistic and, by extension, cultural. This chart shows the percentage share of the word *crisis* in relation to all words in the Google Books database of works in English. The values tracked are minuscule in absolute terms—about 0.0017 percent at the start, climbing to 0.005 percent around 1990—but the line's contours are revealing. The word grows about threefold in frequency over the century. There is a flat stretch in the twenties, spiking as we approach World War II, then a plateau in the postwar decade. From about 1960 to 1995, usage surges. During this period, there is a crisis at every turn: missile crisis, population crisis, energy crisis, hostage crisis, AIDS crisis, climate crisis, debt crisis, water crisis, crisis on infinite Earths, everyone's identity crisis, always in progress.

Since the graph stops just before the new millennium, it might seem of limited usefulness for thinking about developments that start ten years later. However, consider the last segment of the chart, the final decade of the old century. Occurrences fall off to an uncertain plateau. The word still has plenty of currency—how could it not in a time of growing economic and environmental unease?—but people have perhaps begun to have enough of it. With the keyword deployed in so many combinations, any fresh invention would face diminishing returns. On the evidence, we passed peak crisis three decades ago, about the time R.E.M.'s "It's the End of the World as We Know It" turned into a jejune earworm.

This chapter was first drafted before the coronavirus outbreak of 2019. Reread in the summer of 2020, those first paragraphs seem to tempt fate. Google's database stops at 2012, so we can only guess how the graph will look ten years from now. The decade from 2000 to 2010, not included in the graph, shows a pronounced downward hook. Perhaps by 2030, that trend will have reversed as *pandemic crisis* ripples through the record, possibly joined by other dire digrams. We are willing to bet, though, that the overall trend holds.[1] For a long while now, we've had all the crises we can stand.

Especially when combined with the adjective *existential*, the word *crisis* seems all too inevitably apocalyptic. As the human-driven Anthropocene morphs into what cultural critic Donna Haraway calls the "Cthulucene," visions of posthuman End Times overwhelm us (Haraway). At the beginning of the midcentury crisis boom, Stanley Kubrick and Terry Southern gave us *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, a film in which an insane Air Force commander triggers the end of civilization (Kubrick). Nearly a half century later, at the other end of the rising curve, Joss Whedon and Drew Goddard offered *The Cabin in the Woods*, in which something very similar happens, except the agent of doom is the "final girl" of a literally diabolical slasher film—the sanest and most moral person in the story (Whedon and Goddard). After peak crisis, our sense of an ending turns strange and more than a little toxic.

This chapter will eventually make its way, with some digressions, to one Twine writer's poignant response to this predicament—*Queers in Love at the End of the World*, Anna Anthropy's game of apocalypse. We will return inevitably to crisis—that's where we live these days—but we set out toward this destination with a deliberate swerve. Let's replace *crisis* with *critical*. Though technically this change just swaps adjective for noun, there is an important shade of difference. It is easy to imagine *crisis* as a final negative: no way out, no alternative, no future. In contrast, the word *critical* seems more negotiable, implying critical choices, critical practice, critical (and these days, literal) distance. It offers the chance to change the shape of certain curves. It leaves room to swerve. As Borges's labyrinth-novelist says, "I leave to various futures, but not to all, my garden of forking paths" (Borges 26). Some futures are more fortunate than others. In Twine work as in life, the ability to choose is crucial. Choosing *critical* over *crisis* lets us keep faith with the root word

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[1] In a nice bit of just-in-time journalism as this chapter was nearing completion, *Wired* posted a story titled "All This Chaos Might Be Giving You 'Crisis Fatigue'" (Simon).

krinein, which means *to decide*. This choice emphasizes difference, oppositional response, and the exploration of alternatives. It also connects powerfully to elective action, a crucial part of games and play.

Critical Moments

Unlike crisis, which at least implicitly dramatizes itself as a discrete event, critical moments can be flexibly invoked. Turn the calendar to the first weeks of 2019. We've already discussed the appearance of the *Black Mirror* "Bandersnatch" episode, with its Twine connection and an intriguing overture to branching narrative. A few weeks later, Netflix rolled out another show, the miniseries *Russian Doll*, with a radically different approach to story and play (Headland, Babbit, and Lyonne). Like "Bandersnatch," *Russian Doll* focuses on a game coder, the fabulously dissolute Nadia Vulvokov, who, like Stefan Butler, is dropped unwittingly into a garden of forking paths. In a way, both are under the control of a shadowy agency called Netflix, but Nadia's predicament does not involve viewer intervention. Somewhere in the course of every episode, Nadia suffers a bizarre or violent death—run over by a cab, fallen down stairs, poisoned, shot, attacked in the subway by killer bees—after which she returns to her initial position in the episode, staring into a bathroom mirror at a party for her thirty-sixth birthday. Nadia's work as a game designer offers a frame for understanding this iterative experience: like a character failing to complete her quest, Nadia is destined to keep replaying level 36.

Russian Doll deserves more detailed treatment both as a disrupted narrative and as part of the unfolding saga of binge TV, but we will confine ourselves to its juxtaposition with "Bandersnatch" (Slade). The scheduling was most likely coincidental, but all the same, it offers a meaningful contrast. For all that it restricts most player choice to a pair of alternatives, "Bandersnatch" subverts tele-cinematic storytelling. Any choice greater than one affects at least a small insurgency. *Russian Doll* reverses and atones for this rupture, even though it was probably not intended for the purpose. The series turns the ergodic breakpoint into a stylistic device. Instead of the relative openness of a game, it delivers what we might call a *closed, gamelike arc*, an appearance of randomness and contingency that in fact goes where television always goes, to singular narrative and moral resolution. We could gloss *Russian Doll* in many ways—*Groundhog Day* goes to Lower Manhattan, *Memento* with millennials—but it would not be inaccurate to call it a let's-play video with unusually high production values. It is one version of a game.

The pattern that emerges here is nothing new. Claude Lévi-Strauss identified the basic structure in the 1960s, back on the first step of our crisis escalator—a tension between contingency and static balance. In his view, this dynamic was as old as play itself:

> All games are defined by a set of rules which in practice allow the playing of any number of matches. Ritual, which is also 'played,' is on the other hand, like a favored instance of a game, remembered from among the possible ones because it is the only one which results in a particular type of equilibrium between the two sides. The transposition is readily seen in the case of the Gahuku-Gama of New Guinea who have learnt to play football but who will play, several days running, as many matches as are necessary for both sides to reach the same score. . . . This is treating a game as a ritual. (Lévi-Strauss 30–31)[2]

We can see a similar "transposition" in the swing from "Bandersnatch" to *Russian Doll*. The closed, gamelike arc treats game as ritual, preserving not harmony between neighboring tribes but the power structure of an executive culture, the singularity of authorized narrative that is part of what Ruberg calls "chrononormativity" (Ruberg 25). This complex is the target of that memorably self-parodic paranoid branch in "Bandersnatch," where the player makes Stefan aware that he is under the control of an entertainment network from the future. Welcome to videoland. Lévi-Strauss could have heard a similar message a year after his thoughts about game and ritual appeared in English. We imagine him nodding as he tunes in to an episode of *The Outer Limits*

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[2] Thomas Malaby, theorist of play and my colleague at University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, discusses this insight from Lévi-Strauss in his article "Institutions in Play," to which I am indebted (Malaby).

(1963–1965), which began each week with a ritual message from the "Control Voice":

> There is nothing wrong with your television set. Do not attempt to adjust the picture. We are controlling transmission. If we wish to make it louder, we will bring up the volume. If we wish to make it softer, we will tune it to a whisper. We will control the horizontal. We will control the vertical. We can roll the image; make it flutter. We can change the focus to a soft blur or sharpen it to crystal clarity. For the next hour, sit quietly and we will control all that you see and hear. We repeat: there is nothing wrong with your television set. (Wikipedia)

In many ways, the entire ergodic project, the reimagination of storytelling under procedural intervention, might be the afterlife of the Control Voice. In one of the great ironies of human history, computing devices and the internet were developed as adjuncts to the command-and-control culture campily evoked in that old broadcast fantasy. As the public flooded into the new cyberspaces, "everting" them, as Steven Jones says, from fantasy worlds to everyday habitations, the original control culture was replaced by something we struggle to comprehend (Jones 2014). Computer games play a major role in this understanding, so it is not surprising to find games intimately concerned with both control and voices. We will have further thoughts about voices with respect to Davey Wreden's *Beginner's Guide* in the next part of this chapter. For the moment, there is more to say about the object of control, which Lévi-Strauss describes as "equilibrium" (20). Such dynamic balances are inherently fragile, especially under the impact of radically destabilizing, disruptive technologies. There may have been nothing wrong with our television sets—nothing the old networks couldn't fix—but normativity cannot hold when video screen meets game processor, and the network becomes an everted internet.

There would inevitably be attempts to restore the supposed balance of forces between producer and consumer. The appearance of a closed, gamelike arc in 2019 extends a long-running trend. Using similar techniques, films like *Groundhog Day* (Ramis), *Lola Rennt* (Tykwer), and *Memento* (Nolan) fed a vogue for "mind-game" cinema in an increasingly game-obsessed era (see Elsaesser). Complex narratives were carefully channeled into the popular mainstream. Game ideas were adapted for all sorts of screens. The ultimate accommodation came in 2011, when the US Supreme Court ruled in Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association, affirming the cultural standing of video games: "Like the protected books, plays, and movies that preceded them, video games communicate ideas—and even social messages—through many familiar literary devices (such as characters, dialogue, plot, and music) and features distinctive to the medium (such as the player's interaction with the virtual world). That suffices to confer First Amendment protection" (Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association).

It may have seemed ironic that the author of his opinion was Antonin Scalia, the conservative archon. Yet the attempt to affiliate computer games with "books, plays, and movies" is definitionally conservative. Defying disruption, it affirms continuity between the present and the past. It envisions a living, changing culture. (Irony floods back in if we replace *culture* with *Constitution*.) In its way, the opinion is laudable, though the harmonious world it imagines was pure judicial fantasy. Even as Scalia wrote his ruling, the seeds of Gamergate were germinating. They would take roughly a year to flower into full evil, bringing backlash against those who wanted to use games for concerted expression rather than unreflective, unengaged *fun*.

By 2013, *fun* had become a fighting word. As Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux point out, this controversy had been a long time coming, starting the moment games converged with video: "In the same way that the British land enclosure of the eighteenth century transformed public land into private property, so too has the videogame industry worked to privatize the culture of games and play. Games have been replaced by videogames and play has been replaced by fun" (Boluk and Lemieux 8). Some might quibble about the analogy with land enclosure, but the rest of this observation is unimpeachable. The attempt to restore cultural equilibrium, to subordinate gameplay under rituals of consumption-oriented fun, would never succeed. Fun comes in far too many varieties. Ruberg remarks, "#GamerGate has gotten at least one thing right. It is no coincidence that this backlash comes at the same time that queerness is becoming a more central concern in games and the dialogues that surround them. As Katherine Cross has written, proponents of #GamerGate are driven by a fear that video games are changing, that they will no longer belong only to white, straight, cisgender men and boys. And that is true" (Ruberg 13).

There is a reason this chapter, like the previous chapter on Twine camp, returns inevitably to queer gaming and particularly to the work of Bo Ruberg, who has brought us the crucial recognition that video games "have always been queer," driven by a "core" impulse to explore "non-normative desires" that speaks to and proceeds from alterity (Ruberg 11). We embrace this idea because it does so much to explain the ineradicable difference that marks ergodic works. From the perspective of narrative normativity, they represent an unruly, uncanny other. They are fundamentally, deliberately, and joyfully abnormal. The critical moment of Twine owes much to queer people and their ideas, as so many have said before us. In learning to align our work as queer, some straight folk will find a strong sense of solidarity. This sentiment is deep but also hazardous.

Straight minds and bodies are not exposed to the traumas visited on queer people. Queerness is an important place to start—an essential "lens," as Ruberg says—but Ruberg adds a significant caution: "In using the word 'queer' itself, straight, cisgender subjects must remain aware that their experiences are never one and the same with those of LGBTQ people (who themselves bring their own individual perspectives to this work) and that their use of queerness as a lens must come with an acknowledgement of and respect for real, queer lives" (Ruberg 19). Both authors of this book operate in public spaces as white, able-bodied academics in heterosexual or straight-presenting relationships and thus are not subject to the challenges of, aggression toward, and harassment of those who are visibly queer, trans, or othered. For her feminist work, one of us has felt a share of that mistreatment. For his own unorthodoxies, the other has seen nothing worse than some bad reviews. Limits and obligations need to be made clear. The "lens" of alterity is invaluable. It requires "acknowledgement," respect, and more importantly, a commitment to shared struggle, which is the ethos to which this book aspires.

Normativities—economic, erotic, political, chrono-biological—can be powerfully opposed by discourses of difference—feminist, queer, nonwhite, neuro-atypical, anticapitalist. Ruberg's main claim, that video games have always been queer, implies a larger, ongoing struggle. As Boluk and Lemieux demonstrate, genuine play refuses the "enclosure" of pleasure in any hegemonic funhouse. In activating the reader as a player, all ergodic art forms—interactive fictions, game books, hypertexts, games—become at least fellow travelers in this insurgency. We need to consider a broader picture, one that will allow us to place queer games and Twine games in relation to other aspects of their critical moment. This will take us to a work that is outside of the Twine community and whose queerness seems at least debatable but whose questions about games and art are essential to our critical moment.

Turn Back from This Cave

For some, games are all about asking questions. Montfort affiliates interactive fiction with the ancient form of the riddle (Montfort 14). Every game in which we explore some baffling space poses ontological questions: *What is this world? Why is it the way it is? Who am I in this place? What do my interactions reveal?* All world-games are basically riddles; some are more direct than others in framing their enigmas. In his two major efforts so far, Davey Wreden has a way of putting the puzzles up front. *The Stanley Parable* begs the question, *parable of what?* (Wreden and Pugh). Similarly, coming to *The Beginner's Guide*, we might ask, *Guide to what practice, activity, or way of being? Just what are we beginning?* (Wreden).

Many players of *Stanley Parable* come away with plausible answers: the game is about free will and its paradoxical denial; the game explores the tension between structure and play or desire. These are not necessarily the best answers, but they are at least reasonably related to the experience of play. *Beginner's Guide*, by contrast, is harder to fix in a phrase. It's about a broken friendship, about the ethics of creativity, about the reasons for making game-based art. The work may tell us something about the nature and purpose of games. Which brings us to an important question: Is *Beginner's Guide* a game?[3]

The product is sold on Steam as a game, it has been reviewed as a game, and, like *Stanley Parable*, its playable spaces are assembled from components of other games (*Counter-Strike*, *Half-Life*). It seems to belong at least superficially to three divisions of the game market: independent games, B-games, and walking simulators. Yet the play experience of *Beginner's Guide* is about as railed-in as possible. As in *Stanley Parable*, there is voice-over narration keyed to our progress through each level. The plummy BBC announcer of the earlier game is replaced by Wreden speaking as "Davey," a character based on himself. Davey guides us through sixteen chapters and an epilogue, discrete levels ostensibly created by a shadowy figure called "Coda" between October 2008 and June 2011.

We will consider Davey and Coda fictional constructs, thus implicitly metaphorical—though what they represent is open to question.[4] The dates of Coda's efforts align neatly with the creative history of *Stanley Parable*, so some self-reference seems inevitable. *Beginner's Guide* seems ripe for interpretation as psychomachia, the struggle between halves of a divided self. At the same time, the work's slipperiness and complexity defy simplistic understanding. Is it a collection of "weird and experimental" game levels, or a unified production? (The presence of an epilogue—literally a coda yet outside of the Coda collection—strongly suggests the latter.) How should we characterize this effort? Is it a game or a piece of theater, a game-flavored monologue? Maybe *Beginner's Guide* is more video than game—a game collapsed into its own playthrough.

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[3] As we have said previously, this question has become infected by Gamergate and needs to be framed carefully, which I have tried to do in the article on which this section is partly based. See Moulthrop, "Turn Back."

[4] Coda could be based on an actual person; Wreden has been coy on the subject, leaving us free to speculate (see, e.g., Klepek). The name has the appearance of a handle or *nomme de logiciel*—Coda, a coder. In music and writing, a coda is a final supplement, bringing a work to completion.

Beginner's Guide has important resemblances to machinima, game-derived linear video, but it also has features inconsistent with that form. As Davey reminds us in chapter 7 ("Down"), the work was built on the Source game engine. It is not delivered in a video format but as a playable download on Steam. Player action is allowed and often required. In chapter 1 ("Whisper"), we are told we can exit the game by stepping into an energy beam. As in *Stanley Parable*, we can refuse the narrator's suggestion—the beam will kill us—but unlike in *Stanley*, refusal has no interesting consequences; we just linger in a level we have already explored. In chapter 4 ("Stairs"), we are asked to press "Enter" to neutralize a speed limit that prevents us from quickly climbing a set of stairs. We can withhold the action, remaining in agonizingly slow ascent, or join in Davey's subversion of the original rules. These moments are paradigmatic: the system allows us to act, but only in ways that both move us along the rails and often violate an insanely dilatory design.

If *Beginner's Guide* is a game, it is arguably a queer one in the most general meaning of the word, an exploration of strange or deviant forms of play. Whoever or whatever he is, Coda is less game designer than conceptual artist. His levels carry absurd subtitles like "The Streetwise Fool," "Pornstars Die Too," and "Items You Love at Members-Only Prices." Coda appears to be a latter-day surrealist. His games subvert rational thought, substituting the inconsistent, associative flow of dreams. Many of the chapters feel like transcriptions of recurring nightmares—facing an audience across the footlights, or a lecture hall backed by a devouring black hole (been there), or a house with an endless cycle of cleaning chores (there also). Images of prisons, real and symbolic, occur with increasing frequency as the tour goes on.

There is also a sense in which *Beginner's Guide* is literally queer, or at least homo-antisocial. It is, after all, about the intense and ultimately toxic affection of one man for another. No sexual relationship is implied, and there seems no need to imagine one, but in Davey's account, which dominates until the final chapter, there is certainly intimacy. Davey cares deeply about his friend, whom he sees spiraling into a crippling depression. Coda's feelings are harder to describe, but in the early years, at least he seems willing to share his dream-games with Davey. In chapter 7, Coda pranks Davey with a zip file said to contain the ultimate game but which consists entirely of unopenable boxes—woebegone fan that he is, Davey tries each one. Even if it is actually the song of a divided self, the work deploys a fiction of relationship. We remember Ruberg's gloss of *Portal* as the story of a woman wandering through another woman's body (Ruberg 23). By analogy, *Beginner's Guide* shows us one man interfering with another man's imagination.

This recognition provides another reason to set *Beginner's Guide* apart from other works, even within the decidedly offbeat family of walking simulators. The work is not just queer but "weird" in the strict sense of the word: subject to irrational or inexplicable influences. *Beginner's Guide* is haunted. We could speak literally of Davey as an uncanny presence in Coda's games or vice versa, but there is also a ghostly influence from outside of the work. In 1962, Vladimir Nabokov published *Pale Fire*, a novel whose story unfolds through a series of annotations by a Russian émigré critic, Charles Kinbote, written into the manuscript of a poem by a recently deceased American writer, John Shade (Nabokov).[5] Kinbote is an iconic example of an unreliable narrator, a literary stalker who twists the dead man's poem around his personal delusions. One of the first scholars to explore the Nabokovian resonance, Berkan Şimşek, describes the novel as "a beginner's guide to *Beginner's Guide*" (Şimşek). There are very suggestive echoes—the parasitic pseudofriendship between artist and critic; misappropriation of an artwork; gradual exposure of the commentator's tampering with the work he describes. There are also important differences between the two stories. Kinbote is a madman who remains entirely within the grip of his delusions; Davey undergoes a crisis of recognition and achieves something like an epiphany. There are reasons to suspect Kinbote may have murdered Shade; all we have in *Beginner's Guide* is a very bitter breakup. Above all, there are no overt connections between the two works, no allusions or intertextual references, no clear reason to suspect Wreden has read *Pale Fire*.

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[5] The echoes of Nabokov were first brought to this writer's attention by Nathan Humpal, metadata librarian at University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and game scholar nonpareil. Having made the connection himself, he found confirmation in Guido Pellegrini's "'The Beginner's Guide': Confessions of a Game Designer" (Pellegrini). I am also indebted to my student Ryan House, whose article on Wreden introduced me to *Beginner's Guide* (House).

Whatever its resonances, the tension between Davey and Coda defines the work's descending narrative arc. At the outset, Davey tells us Coda has withdrawn from the game world. By publicizing Coda's genius, Davey hopes to encourage his friend to return to his art. As the tour of Coda's games proceeds, however, Davey's intrusions become more extensive and frequent and his commentary increasingly negative. Chapter 7 alludes to a debate between Davey and Coda over whether games should be playable. In chapter 9 ("Escape"), Davey warns that "this one is tough" and notes that Coda appears to be "unraveling" because he "lacks a voice to tell himself when enough is enough." In chapter 12 ("Theater"), Davey says Coda is "beginning to shut down," as iron bars repeatedly slam into the ground behind us. The text option that leads to the solution in chapter 12 ("Mobius") reads, "I can't keep making these." After this, Coda's supposed breakdown—or the demise of his friendship with Davey—proceeds to a climax. Chapter 14 ("Island") runs through a series of bewilderingly evocative dream images, ending with a fleeting glimpse of a naked, weeping figure glimpsed through prison bars. In chapter 15 ("Machine"), we play first as an interrogator putting hard questions to a machine that has stopped working. Eventually, we acquire a gun, which we can turn on an image of the machine. As its surface flies away, we see bits of computer code beneath.

Chapter 16 ("The Tower") is the last in the dated sequence. It is a "cold" level, Davey says. He tells us the game seems to despise its player. Reflecting on his attempt to celebrate meaning in Coda's games, he confesses, "I feel like I failed," and "I don't know this person." Crucially, Davey also reveals that he has made unannounced modifications to some of the levels and that bringing Coda's games to public attention has brought him fame and fulfillment. Finally, after ascending a series of twisty passages to the top of the tower, we enter a gallery space. In the display panels are messages from Coda to Davey accusing him of even deeper intrusion into his designs. Davey has added the lampposts we have seen in various levels, where they are claimed as evidence of Coda's interest in coherent play. Coda speculates that he has added solutions to some of his games under Davey's influence. Above all, he indicts Davey for making his games public without his permission—in effect, stealing his work. He asks that Davey have nothing further to do with him: "When I am around you, I feel physically ill."

At this point, the game's central fiction collapses. Chapter 16 is followed by an epilogue whose status is eminently questionable. All the previous Coda games have dates of composition. The epilogue has none. It looks like another of Coda's compositions, but the link has been severed. Who dreamed this final dream, Davey or Coda? We cannot know who these figures are to us now or if they were ever real. Davey's narration continues haltingly as we move through the first of several dream transitions: railway station, tracks, great house, museum, salt mine, station/museum again, finally into something that may be a sculpture garden or a set of ruins. Davey is with us at the outset, talking more to himself than to the player ("solution, solution, solution"). Eventually, he gives up.

Coda's revulsion has shown Davey the awful depth of his vanity, of his need for "more, more" doses of "external validation." He realizes he has misunderstood Coda: "Maybe he just likes making prisons." He apologizes for abandoning the player—"I know I said I would be there to walk you through this"—but he has work to do now, presumably the beginning of a new art no longer dependent on externalities. He signs off abruptly, leaving us alone to make our way through a final set of passages to something we have seen before: the energy beam from chapter 1. When we stepped into the earlier instance, we found ourselves transported (in what Davey called a "glitch") through the ceiling of the level, allowing us to look down on the maze we had just traversed. Stepping into the final beam has the same effect, though the vast scale of the maze we rise above suggests a city, a continent, or a planet—also, strangely, the loops and whorls of a fingerprint. Above us is a starry cosmos. The screen goes black.

But the game is not quite over, at least as we understand it. As is often the case in ambitious games, there is a song to accompany the credit roll. The singer is the Canadian vocalist Halina Heron. Music and lyrics are by Ryan Roth:

> *Turn back*
> *Turn back from this cave*
> *You said "let me prove that I'm brave,*
> *Let me keep going."*
>
> *But the cave goes for miles*
> *And miles and miles*
> *And you're so tired*
> *But I know that you're strong*
>
> *So turn back,*
> *Turn ba-a-ack.*

Strictly speaking, a song over credits is paratextual. We are not obligated to consider it part of the game's main business. However, after Coulton's incisive anthems for *Portal* and *Portal 2*, closing-credits songs have become more salient, particularly in Valve productions. There is good reason to suppose that, like "Still Alive" and "Want You Gone," the final song in *Beginner's Guide* was commissioned for the project. *Beginner's Guide* is dedicated "to R," who could be the writer of the song, Wreden's sometime collaborator and soundman Ryan Roth. Though the gameplay is over when we hear it, Roth's song needs to be considered in any attempt to understand the work—which is, after all, as much video (in this case, music video) as game.

Ever since Plato, caves have been associated in the scholarly mind with allegory. In *Gamer Theory*, McKenzie Wark restyles Plato's theater of sensual illusion into a game arcade. This imagined space summarizes the all-enclosing episteme of digital gaming (Wark 2). Perhaps this is the forbidden zone we are called on to reject. At the same time, sticking more closely to the terms of the Davey-Coda story suggests another interpretation. The cave might stand for the artistic catastrophe these two figures represent, the interminable contest between fame-seeking, public-facing expression (Davey) and an absolute formalism (Coda) that doesn't especially care if its prison-games can be played.[6] In this sense, the turn back is not a renunciation of gaming per se—though it comes at the end of an artwork that is not-quite-not a game—but perhaps a turn toward a better-conceived ludic future.

Maybe. The next offering by Wreden and Roth, *Absolutely: A True Crime Story*, does not seem especially promising in this regard (Wreden and Roth). Built in RPG Maker, the game is an ostensible "deconstruction" (Wreden's word) of Japanese role-playing games from the eighties and nineties. For some reason, it features a protagonist named Keanu Reeves, whom the player maneuvers around pixelated streets to prove he is not a serial stabber—unless we decide he is. Depending on our menu selections, he may also hand out dime bags of "the good stuff." This game seems less oriented toward a future aesthetic than toward the campy currency of games like *Cry$tal Warrior Ke$ha*—which have their virtues, though they hardly renounce external validation. As one reviewer noted, "For a meaningless parody project, *Absolutely: A True Crime Story* does a great job of showing just how compelling purposelessness [*sic*] referentiality can be" (Gach).

Perhaps Wreden's own turn back is not complete, or the maneuver may be more complicated than the song leads us to believe. There could be yet more moves in this dance—at this writing, Wreden is advertising for collaborators on another major project. Wark also imagines a turn away from the cave of gamespace, but conceptual dervish that she is, she continues the spin until she comes full circle, once more facing the cave: "The gamer arrives at the beginnings of a reflective life, a gamer theory, by stepping out of The Cave—and returning to it. . . . If the gamer is to hold gamespace to account in terms of something other than itself, it might not be that mere shadow of a shadow of the real, murky, formless that lurks like a residue in the corners. It might instead be the game proper, as it is played in The Cave. . . . The game shadows the real form of the algorithm" (Wark 19).

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[6] In a very humble way, we modeled this dilemma in our indefensibly ableist carousel game in chapter P-2, example 2.7.

Stepping back into the cave is the work of "gamer theory," which (as we hope this book demonstrates) involves as much playful practice as intellectual speculation. This theory-at-work asks for an understanding of the formal structures that underlie games: algorithms as well as the cultural logics, which Wark calls "allegorithms," in which these forms participate. In its most powerful form, we find gamer theory not in scholarly books but in games intended for experimental or deviant/devious play. Twine has been an important platform for efforts of this kind, and so it is to Twine games we make our way at last.

Ends of the Beginning

Updating Wark with the insights of Ruberg, Boluk, and Lemieux, we might say there are two possible avenues for allegorithmic criticism, or the therapeutic queering of games. One approach comes through theme or content: exploring divergent characters, settings, and situations. The thematic side of our critical moment is well represented in Twine games. Works like D. Squinkifer's *Quing's Quest VII*, discussed at length earlier, and Anthropy's *Hunt for the Gay Planet* (Anthropy, "Hunt") come at heteronormativity in game culture from the perspective of gay, trans, and gender-fluid characters. Porpentine's *Ultra Business Tycoon III* (Porpentine), Tom McHenry's *Tonight Dies the Moon* (McHenry), and Kris Ligman's *You Are Jeff Bezos* (Ligman, "You Are Jeff Bezos") satirize the obscenities of contemporary capitalism and the neoliberal orthodoxies of digital play. As Twine writers turn their attention to assumptions and operations of gameplay—the point where allegorithm meets algorithm—a second front of resistance opens.

This approach reinterprets games and play structurally, often at the level of basic player actions or game mechanics. The mechanics of intimacy discussed in earlier chapters present an opening to this strategy. Some years back, a Twine creator called neongrey pushed intimate mechanics across the species line in *Cat Petting Simulator 2014* (neongrey). We have already noted Porpentine's recruitment of the player's body as a writing surface in *With Those We Love Alive*. Neongrey extends this embodied aesthetic to the whole mammalian family. Petting a cat or some other friendly, furry creature reactivates primate grooming instincts lost long ago by naked apes. For humans not prevented by allergies or other conditions, petting can be a relaxing, centering, life-affirming experience. (Cats seem to like it too, though generally on their terms.) Until the arrival of something like William Gibson's "simstim," technologies can only represent this experience through images or symbols (Gibson). In conventional 3-D games, it would be a matter of a button-press and a resulting set of animations, maybe with a bass purr on the soundtrack. On a text-based platform like Twine, the representation can go deeper—not to mention more broadly in its implications.

In 2018 Ligman adapted neongrey's concept and crossed it with their own satiric agenda in *Pet Cats, Save the World* (Ligman, "Pet Cats"). The title itself could be considered as critique. Here is a game that calls out its play mechanic in its name. That move might not be original—the *Grand Theft Auto* series does something similar—but it prompts an interesting question: What if more games were named for their basic activities? The answer suggests GameStop shelves filled with seventies-style generic packaging sporting titles like *Shoot Shoot and Get Shot XXVII*, *Mutilate Undead Corpses LXV*, and *Jump Scare 4000*. If nothing else, Ligman's forthright title nicely frames player expectations: making some cats happy will adjust the moral arc of the universe. Here are three passages in sequence from the game:

> You take a sip of your drink and settle into your seat, allowing the delicious roasted warmth [of your favorite coffee] to spread through you.
>
> After a moment, you feel something brushing against your ankle. You look down to find that a long-haired smoky kitten of about 12 weeks has wandered over and rubbed against your leg.
>
> Pet the cat
>
> You reach down with your free hand and gently stroke a few fingers over the kitten's back.
>
> ICE has been dismantled.

> Pet the cat again
>
> The kitten rolls over onto their side for you, exposing their soft belly. You pet them while deftly avoiding the absolute terror zone.
>
> In that same moment, a beloved old friend you've lost touch with suddenly texts you.
>
> Pet another cat (Ligman, "Pet Cats")

And so forth, wonderfully. There are enough complications to keep the game interesting. Failing to optimize your textual choices for feline desire can result in a neutral ending; persist in petting against the grain and you can find yourself mauled and bitten at the bad end of the story. However, it is easy enough to reach the good end: a peaceful nap for you and your companion, with the state of the US government, the entertainment industry, and your character's finances much improved. Neongrey's earlier game became a refuge for people reeling from Gamergate, Brexit, and the 2016 US election. Ligman's satiric variation improves those psychic defenses.

Though in some ways just a modestly clever turn on a charming concept, *Pet Cats, Save the World* engages critically with game culture. Like neongrey's simulator, it explores an important alternative territory of desire, if not gender-queer then something like species-quaint.[7] In making this turn, the game attacks another idol of game culture, the fixation on epic or operatic narrative. Bogost has complained that so many games involve huge, existential threats to humanity and/or the universe, wondering why there are not more games about quiet, ordinary human experience (Bogost 18). *Pet Cats* answers this call with its own mechanic of intimacy, but Ligman's topical update of the earlier game adds an ironic spin. We indeed save the world, not with brutal heroics but through simple, animal bliss. Yet for all its undeniable delight, there is something bittersweet about this story. We may play ourselves into the ultimate catnap, but in real life, we will awaken to a broken universe where the effect of petting cats is only locally magical. Sadly, the most likely word after *wish fulfillment* is usually *fantasy*.

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[7] Salter points out here the importance of games like *Catz* and *Dogz* in establishing interspecies affection as a theme of play. The Pokémon universe deserves mention also in this regard.

To fully understand Twine in its critical moment, we need to consider a game that reverses the polarity of desire in Ligman's sad, sweet ode to joy—a game that is in many ways a mirror image of his invention. This is Anna Anthropy's *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (Anthropy, "Queers"). Where *Pet Cats* offers instant gratification, this game inflicts equally swift and assured loss. In place of wish fulfillment, it gives us a blank but no less hyperreal apocalypse. In terms of its brief, broken diegesis, it is not a beginner's guide but a Dies Irae or hymn of endings. Yet this game is also a remarkably clear response to its critical moment. While it may not deliver the pleasures of a warm body—this is precisely what the game denies us—*Queers in Love* explains what it means to turn back, not so much from the cave of aesthetic crisis but from the horror of an impending future. In this respect, it may have its own strange message of difference, struggle, and hope.

Love and Permadeath

Electronic text replaces itself many times a second. Everything is wiped away and replaced either with the same screen state or a different one. Through its pattern of action and response inherited from both interactive fiction and hypertext, Twine invites both use and abuse of this effect. At its root, a digital computer is a logic processor, an adding machine—and a clock. Those who balk at identifying text-based works as video games because they generally lack graphics might remember that video, like cinema, is a technology of simulated motion. Motion implies time. As Bogost and Montfort showed in *Racing the Beam*, every video game is on the clock (Montfort and Bogost). This includes games of electronic text. McDaid's delta-t's turn the time. Ligman's enchanting cats change the world, averting an apocalypse. Other works, however, take apocalypse by the horns. In Pierre Chevalier's *Destroy / Wait* the player is given those twin options with a series of objects:

cities, trees, love (Chevalier). Choosing *wait* temporizes, extending the narrative. *Destroy* iterates the nightmare of history—and this option always comes at the end of each chain of evasion. The dark fatalism of that game is not the last word in this line, however. *Queers in Love* spares us the waiting.

Queers in Love at the End of the World plays with time across two registers. As its title indicates, it is set in an End Times where we are doomed to read a fatal sentence: "Everything is wiped away" (Anthropy, "Queers"). The nature of the apocalypse is never spelled out—not that we need it to be. Our time is filled with threats—as promised, we've come back to crisis in the end. Some of us live in the knowledge that the virus now rampant will likely kill us, and people we love, if we cannot avoid infection. Other agencies of doom are easy enough to imagine: climate convulsion, fascist holocaust, nuclear war—or perhaps, to return to fiction, just writerly imperative, driven by the sense that this world can't last.

If one hand of Anthropy's clock sums up millennia of human history, the second hand is just that: a counter that works through a ten-second interval, graphically depicted as a closing circle inside which we see how little time we have left. This is a text game that diabolically permits almost no time for reading, an engine of frustration and distraction. Long ago, somewhere in Anna Anthropy's early childhood, this writer produced a hypertext fiction called *Hegirascope* (Moulthrop, "Hegirascope"), which gives readers thirty seconds to select an outbound link before it chooses for them. At its debut, Michael Joyce called this work "the hypertext that reads itself" (Joyce). By analogy, *Queers in Love* would be the hypertext that withholds itself, even more steadfastly refusing our desire to read, among other desires. It gives us a mechanic not of intimacy but of stymied gratification—specifically so because the story it lays out describes desperate passion: "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."

Each of the verbs is hyperlinked, forming a fourfold gate that promises further development of this poignant scene. Here is one way the story can unfold:

[2—take]
You take her hand in yours, giving it a squeeze.

Look into her eyes.
Kiss her.
Put your hand up her skirt,
Just hold her hand.

[3—Just hold her hand]
Your fingers twine between hers. After all the forces that tried to keep you and her apart, maybe just holding her hand is enough.

[4a—twine]
What a powerful form of expression.

[4b—trying again, this time taking the link on "enough"]
Maybe it's enough to know that they lost.

[5—No onward link; time runs out]
Everything is wiped away.

That final phrase is both diegetic and procedural or ludonarrative: it announces the erasure of the lovers and their world and at the same time a clearing of the textual record. The final act in this game is *permadeath*, a halting state that erases all traces of previous progress (Juul 86).[8] However, the fatal passage includes two links, "Afterword" and "Restart." The first leads to a final statement, closing off the game. The other offers a fresh try from the initial passage ("In the end . . ."). In the record mentioned earlier, the fatal passage comes after we have completed the narrative line—twice actually, as we explore both branches from the third passage. As we will explain later, this reading was not produced entirely within the game. The wiping-away passage will appear whenever the ten-second timer runs out. In actual gameplay, this is likely to happen before the player reaches the end of even a four-passage story line, and some lines are longer. Thus until patience gives out, players are likely to take the restart option multiple times, reentering the hypertextual maze in an attempt to retrace previous steps.

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[8] This account is basically accurate, though it elides some details. Once "everything is wiped away," the player is locked into the terminal passage. Before this point, it is possible to use the browser "Back" button, making previous states of the reading technically accessible. Thus a record of play is indeed lost at the ending, constituting permadeath. While it remains, however, the usefulness of this record is tenuous. Using the "Back" function on any passage except the first or last spawns a new ten-second clock that runs concurrently with the original. The resulting fragmentation of the game's time scheme is more likely to produce bewilderment than coherent reading.

Ruberg and Claudia Lo, who each read *Queers in Love* with notable insight, de-emphasize the deathwardness of the narrative, legitimately concentrating on the larger, processual aspects of play experience. For Ruberg, the game exemplifies the queering of "chrononormative" in-game death, a concept they call "permalife" (Ruberg). Lo makes a revealing comparison between Anthropy's game and so-called slow cinema:

> Expressing something as simple as recalling several memories at once is a complicated affair that requires at least four separate playthroughs. The ten-second limit actually serves to stretch out time rather than compress it. Like the lingering camera of slow cinema, the game spins out time in an indulgent manner. Slow cinema focuses on the unbelabored body, and its gaming counterpart is the unresponsive body incapable of acting quickly enough, or drastically enough, to satisfy the player. To know what is happening, the player must put in the work of reading, remembering, and racing against the timer. If slow cinema redeploys boredom in order to draw attention to "that genre's insistent disarticulation of the body onscreen from the body offscreen," then *Queers* redeploys panic in a similar way. In short, the panic and anxiety of the player is contrasted with the calm certainty of their character. (Lo 190)[9]

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[9] The included quotation is from Schoonover's article on slow cinema (Schoonover).

Lo's reading is remarkable in several ways. She understands hypertextual multiplicity with a clarity that has eluded older critics. Bringing in the discourse of embodiment from slow-cinema theory once again illuminates the mechanics of intimacy. She also suggests, importantly, the potential of this game to deconstruct its form and medium.

We will work toward a similar end with perhaps a bit more emphasis on the discontinuity of the action, in contrast to its (quite real) para-cinematics. We take Lo's point about embodiment, though we will contextualize it differently. Given the likelihood of repetition, we describe the fatalities of *Queers in Love* as little permadeaths, after the French metaphor for sexual ecstasy. This suggestion eroticizes play and reading, but *Queers in Love* is, after all, a work of disrupted erotic fiction—many traversals are considerably more explicit than the one given earlier. As the title announces, the desire in play here is specifically queer. We can take this marking in its biopolitical sense, noting how the game's second-person address interpellates the player as someone who desires a queer partner. Anthropy's use of she/her pronouns for the lover is interesting, as it throws interpretive smoke at those still indoctrinated by patriarchy, where the feminine object may look deceptively like the default of straight, male poets. That history has no purchase here. Straight people must imagine themselves as lesbian—or better, recognize that gender reference and amatory choice are no longer governed by binaries.

While its grand themes may be love and loss, along the way, *Queers in Love* works through frustration and satisfaction of desire. As *Hegirascope* tried to do in its day, *Queers in Love* interrogates an ever-accelerating attention economy. Any simple transcript of the work will fail to capture its dynamic effects—something Ruberg and Lo also make clear. As we have noted, the representation of game narrative shown earlier does not record a single, uninterrupted play session. Though it may look like what Montfort calls a "traversal," a completed run through an interactive fiction, what you see here only simulates such a procedure (Montfort 32).

To reach almost any conclusion, players will most likely finesse or bypass the game's primary rules of play. In the case of the pseudotraversal, we reached the end of the story line by repeatedly restarting the game and taking screenshots of successive passages. Players with quicker hands and eyes might manage without such maneuvers, effectively speed-running the game; though, given the strict economy of attention, this style of play must limit comprehension. Playing through four passages in ten seconds leaves 2.5 seconds for each—plenty of time to read a quick sentence or phrase, but probably not enough for a reflective choice among the four links in the second passage or even the dual set in the third.

With this queering of play, Anthropy brings together the discourses of *ludus* and *eros*. Reading about acts of desire makes us desire to keep reading, holding to that middle state of narrative arousal or hypertextual possibility from which the circling clock inexorably excludes us. We can refer to Ruberg's chrononormativity and the ways queer games oppose it. Ruberg acknowledges the role of player death in disrupting traits like singularity and authority, though with appropriate skepticism, since player death can also be a component of reactionary fun (Ruberg 206). Arguably, Anthropy's disruptive design, with its *petite*-permadeath, falls squarely on the side of critique. This will be clear if we align her work with the examples used earlier in discussing chrononormativity: "Bandersnatch" and *Russian Doll*. The former is a genuine, if flawed, game, the latter a closed, gamelike arc converting game to ritual. We can try to fit *Queers in Love* into this binary scheme, perhaps on the game side, but despite its context (Anthropy wrote it for the Ludum Dare game jam in 2013), *Queers in Love* really belongs neither to the pole positions nor anywhere between. It is neither game nor ritual but *antigame*.

It is worth considering the several ways in which this description applies. First, while the possibility of winning is not an absolute requirement for games (see Juul), its absence is often significant. Diegetically, *Queers in Love* is unwinnable. Even if you reach the end of a narrative line before the clock winds down, you will meet the same fate as more dilatory players: everything will be wiped away. For all that the endings represent glorious *Liebestode*, they are also, symbolically speaking, versions of the same event, the great permadeath of "everything." We could apply the same analysis on the ludic side. Does winning mean optimal performance, speed-running to the end of a narrative line with only hasty glimpses of its contents? This would seem a strange requirement for a text game. Or should we define winning in completist terms as exploration of all possible story lines, an anthology or autopsy of all the game's possibilities? This solution shows more respect for Anthropy's prose, but what about the gameplay?

It is tempting to label *Queers in Love* an antigame because it is deliberately unplayable, designed to exhaust conventional ludic engagement. In fact, though, this work may be too playable. Wark at one point defines the goal of gamer theory as "to play at play itself, but from within the game" (Wark 019). She has in mind a turn back to the cave of gamespace duly informed by allegorithmic insight. It is possible to understand Anthropy's game in these terms: recognizing the game's insanely apocalyptic time scheme, we speed-run or screen-shoot to "play at play." However, there are other opinions on the playability of play. David Myers, whose neoformalism contrasts sharply with Wark's approach, says this about the hierarchy of playful forms: "If you play with a simulation, it becomes a game; if you play with a game it becomes just play; and if you play with play—well, you can't play with play: *play pwnz*"[10] (Myers 26; emphasis in original). Play is an absolute; we can play *at* playing (theory-play), but if we attempt a twist on play itself, we find ourselves played.

Arguably both *Queers in Love* and *Beginner's Guide* lie at the far end of Myers's second division. Beginning as simulations (of apocalypse in the first instance, of a gamer's portfolio in the second), they run through the territory of game, emerging into a liminal zone on the other side. They are in a way two expressions of a similar artistic crisis. Both share a sense of divided purpose, encapsulated in Wreden's Davey/Coda pairing. Davey is biographer and interpreter, social animal and extrovert, seeker of human truths. The Davey side of *Queers in Love* shows in its story lines the doomed desires of the fated lovers. Coda is a maker of impenetrable prisons and unwinnable games, an uncompromising, hermetical formalist. The Coda aspect of *Queers in Love* is its diabolical dynamic, the time-lock that repeatedly slams down a barrier, sealing us out.

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[10] That last word is hopelessly infected by its origins in toxic gamer culture. I quote it not for its ideology of dominance but because it marks in stark linguistic terms the limits of theory.

Crisis is decisive, transformative, a point of decision or choice. Played to its logical and artistic conclusion, neither work remains simply a game, but the ways they resolve their crises are diametrically different. The ultimate guidance of *Beginner's Guide* is "turn back." The work is only nominally a game, using affordances of digital play mainly to advance its underlying monologue. It has more than half collapsed from game to gamelike arc, or from game to ritual. *Queers in Love*, on the other hand, manipulates game mechanics so radically that for many players, the experience transforms into pure, subversive play. We jump out of the game and play back against its structures.

In a way, *Queers in Love* also turns us back from the endless cavern of game-simulation-play, but with an important difference. In its queering of gameplay, this work turns crucially from crisis to critical practice. Davey deserts us in the cave, headed off to forge the uncreated conscience of his art. The creator of *Queers in Love* makes no such departure. She does not need to. Her work is already intensely engaged with its moment. It is, after all, a relentless deconstruction of apocalyptic thinking. To understand Anthropy's achievement, it is useful to slide back down the crisis-banister of the previous century, back to the heyday of TV's Control Voice—though the testimony we seek will come not from television but a visionary novel:

> Taking and not giving back, demanding that "productivity" and "earnings" keep on increasing with time, the System remov[es] from the rest of the World these vast quantities of energy to keep its own tiny desperate fraction showing a profit: and not only most of humanity—most of the World, animal, vegetable, and mineral, is laid waste in the process. The System may or may not understand that it's only buying time. And that time is an artificial resource to begin with, of no value to anyone or anything but the System, which sooner or later must crash to its death, when its addiction to energy has become more than the rest

> of the World can supply, dragging with it innocent souls all along the chain of life. Living inside the System is like riding across the country in a bus driven by a maniac bent on suicide. . . . He is waiting beside the door of the bus in his pressed uniform. . . . As he nods you by, you catch a glimpse of his face, his insane, committed eyes, and you remember then, for a terrible few heartbeats, that of course it will end for you all in blood, in shock, without dignity—but there is meanwhile this trip to be on. . . . Over your seat, where there ought to be an advertising plaque, is instead a quote from Rilke: "Once, only once . . ." One of Their favorite slogans. No return, no salvation, no Cycle. (Pynchon 480)

These words were written between 1966 and 1971, on the cusp of the first oil shock, though they track with depressing accuracy our even later stage of capitalism and ecological trauma. They come from a work of fiction, *Gravity's Rainbow*, that in some ways epitomizes the late-twentieth-century counterculture, crying out for return, salvation, and Cycle against extraction and dissipation. Like our later game-fictions, the book was a crisis work, a push against artistic limits. Its narrative famously collapses into fragmentation and self-denial. It is also, in the root sense of the word, an apocalypse or revelation, its final scene a vision of extinction whose last word is replaced by a traumatic dash.

Despite the structural similarity of their abrupt endings, there is a considerable difference between the novel and the game. Pynchon's bus rider will die in "blood, shock, without dignity." Anthropy elides agony in her erasures and in many instances finishes her story lines with an affirmation: "When she kisses you back, she's telling you your needs are real." Or "So many people and institutions tried to pull you two apart. They all failed." Though in a millennial context, they/them becomes an alternative pronoun choice, Anthropy's usage in this last case reminds us of the old 1960s *Them*, oppressors of *Us*, and thus of the fact that we are still, in the new century, deeply concerned with systems. Pynchon's System—capitalized in every sense of the word—appears as "a bus driven by a maniac bent on suicide." While we are still on that terrible trip in the new century, we have access to other kinds of systems: computing machines, platforms, networks, games.

The system of 2013 differs crucially from its counterpart in 1973. We may not own or control it in any ultimately satisfying way, but we can at least try some strategic interventions. Anthropy's queer-critical perspective endows her with the core wisdom of counterculture—namely, that time is an artificial resource "of no value to anyone but the System" (Pynchon). As Lo's cinematic reading makes clear, time is negotiable. Time is in play. Anthropy's small-*s* system—the queer loops of her Twining—values time in its own nonnormative way. This new system is iterable: we can restart the game. It is also permutable: we are invited to jam or hack the game when it exceeds the bounds of play. With whatever odds against success, we can even attempt to play play itself. These ludic maneuvers amount to a major critical achievement.

Queers in Love at the End of the World deconstructs apocalypse, putting the terrible fatality of that all-too-present event literally under erasure. Pynchon's imperfect sentence comes on the last page of a book. It delivers, even as it fails to deliver, a final word. When "everything is wiped away" on the self-replacing screen of a video game, there is always the possibility of Cycle—sixty or so per second in fact—of reboot, of return to the mischievous dominion of play. We may yet be on that gas-guzzling bus of doom, its maniac driver at the national wheel, but we dream of difference and we have begun to express ourselves in the queer medium of games. At the very least, we can take down that plaque They hung over our seat. In place of "Once, only once," we can write—on our own flesh if need be—the graffito that is Anna Anthropy's afterword:

WHEN WE HAVE EACH OTHER WE HAVE EVERYTHING.

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