

## CHAPTER T-2

# Twine (R)evolutions

Works built in Twine hearken back to early electronic literature, evoking HyperCard and Eastgate hypertext fictions, but their relationship with these established digital forms is not straightforward (as we'll discuss further in chapter T-3). The reception and definition of Twine as a platform recalls the many debates of definitions surrounding electronic literature. Works in Twine have been included in interactive fiction competitions, displayed at independent games festivals, and built as part of interactive story jams. However, despite Twine's link to hypertext fiction, it has not been as visible in the electronic literature community. In an interview in *Guardian*, designer and writer Anna Anthropy has called attention to the works in Twine as part of a "revolution," noting that they offer a solution to some of the dehumanizing aspects of mainstream games: "I think that what I want to see more of in games is the personal—games that speak to me as a human being, that are relatable, which is the opposite of the big publisher games that I see. People who are creating personal games aren't hundred-person teams, they are people working at home, making games with free software of their own experiences" (Ellison). Key Twine works evoking this personal literary construct include Nora Last's *Here's Your Rape*, Finny's *At the Bonfire*, Anna Anthropy's *Escape from the Lesbian Gaze*, and

Zoë Quinn, Patrick Lindsey, and Isaac Schankler's *Depression Quest*. We examine these works (and many others) as part of "Twining"—a practice, event, and platform that challenges the existing discourse of several disciplines—and further invite the reader to engage in their own personal making, subversion, and reflection. *Twining* will, like Twine itself, intertwine theory, practice, and poetics—we will weave together principles of making with an examination of the many Twines. Twine is simultaneously punk and childish, new and retro, a return to nineties hypertext and a procedurally driven rejoinder to web 2.0's toxic "real self"—driven social spheres of performance and harassment.

What follows is an autoethnography positioning Twine as a force for culture, documenting and at times wrestling with the emergence of Twine as a piece of cultural software—a history of encounters, people, interfaces, and aesthetics that situate Twine's significance as a platform with queer, feminist, and punk leanings. We apologize in advance for what it does oddly but would argue that this oddness is necessary for embracing what makes Twine Twine. As such, in this chapter, we diverge into the "I," drawing on Anastasia Salter's point of view (again, with apologies and trepidation). In this rapid, personally situated history, we consider Twine as a tool of disruption and invite you to join us in asking, Why Twine?

### Welcome to the Neighborhood

The appeal of Twine is the appeal of a GeoCities neighborhood (my first virtual "home" was in Area 51—for those unfamiliar, that was once the designated space for science fiction fandom and home to many writers of another important form of electronic literature—fan fiction). My GeoCities site was populated by animated GIFs "adopted" from online artists, webrings links to other preteens and teenagers with rambling, and confessional web pages filled with fandom, and most of my early writing (such as it was) was done in the collaborative, free-form space of a role-playing chatroom in my first fandom. (Which fandom is irrelevant and omitted here for self-preservation. OK, it was *Mummies Alive!*) Thankfully, any and all record of this appears to have been

erased by the death of the old-school web (reader: do not view this as a challenge, please). These websites gave birth to the similarly aesthetically challenged chaos of MySpace, which similarly featured the web-1.0 look of clashing backgrounds, bad animation, and lots of flashing and moving parts—an aesthetic shown in figure 9, which we will revisit in chapter T-4.



**Figure 9:** A typical '90s website, <https://geocities.restorativland.org/Area51/Atlantis/2782/>. Mine was worse.

By contrast, Facebook is boring, uniform, and tiresome, with a panopticon of profiles, all the same and algorithmically monitored. Interactive fiction constructed in parsers has always felt similarly off-putting to me—colorless and gray. Inform 7 has the cookie-cutter visual look of corporate web 2.0, despite its decidedly rebellious lineage. Twine, on the other hand, is the discordant, frequently visually dissonant development tool that seems to have grown up on GeoCities, MySpace, and LiveJournal.

But back to GeoCities: when I was happily linking my site to others through webrings and banner exchanges, I was not particularly aware that hypertextual narratives were a thing (or even a thing other people did), and that is something I suspect I have in common with many of the writer/designers who discovered Twine. On reflection, I was

participating in their ilk—the interwoven narratives of self-inserted characters appearing and reappearing in fan fiction traded and rewritten had its moments. While I was generationally of the right age to grow up on graphic adventure games and a few text-game holdovers, I would not discover hypertext fictions and electronic literature until a college class directed me to the appropriate corners of the web and required the purchase of an Eastgate CD that didn't want to run even then. That disk, Deena Larsen's beautiful work *Samplers* (1996), is still on my shelf for posterity's sake alongside many other unplayable pieces. As a platform, Eastgate's Storyspace was immediately off-putting to me: anything that can't be shared freely online or found in a computer software store seemed to me (raised on fan fiction) inaccessible. Hypertext fictions seemed better-suited to thrive when made open on the web and lived alongside GeoCities in nineties venues, including *New River*, *Postmodern Culture*, and *Iowa Review*.

Prior to Twine, I built hypertextual narratives and scholarly projects the old-fashioned way, with tons of files and links. Built in Notepad and featuring the correspondingly horrific coding styles of the 1990s and early 2000s, these projects usually had inline styles, overly complex table layouts, and even the occasional piece of animated text. (My first game, built rebelliously as a JavaScript vocabulary quiz for a class board game assignment, featured an entry portal so complicated that no one could find it until I wrote out a detailed instruction manual.) I left this style of web development behind for years, lured in by the world and tools of graphical game development. For years, the idea of teaching something like Twine in the game design classes where I would teach primarily Flash, XNA, and Unity would have seemed laughable—getting students to care or see text-based games as relevant was nearly impossible. In an interactive narrative course I later developed, I brought in Inform 7 in a pre-Twine concept, and students struggled with both the text emphasis and the idea of making games that were this complicated. The graphical world seemed to have won.

But something happened. Flash died. I wrote it a eulogy, slightly early but quickly proven final, released during the same year as Gamergate. More on that later (Salter and Murray). Gaming changed: it needed

a new disruptive platform, a space for metacommentary like the Flash games that used to mock the standards and norms of console games and mainstream gaming. And similarly, those displaced, alienated, and boxed-in by web 2.0 would start looking for tools to break out—tools that would be accessible and would, most importantly, allow for rapid circulation and distribution outside of gated platforms, software installations, and expense. Twine would make a place for itself as that platform.

What follows is my highly biased, timeline-jumping, woefully incomplete narrative of why I think that is.

### The University of Baltimore, or How I Accidentally Was Present for the Birth of Twine\*

\*(But Mostly Missed It)

I started my doctoral program at the University of Baltimore (UB) in 2007. I ended up in a class with a cohort of interesting fellow students, including Chris Klimas, who would later be known as the creator of Twine. We had some conversations about interactive fiction, but I did not, at the time, realize I was talking to someone who would redefine the term. Chris Klimas introduced himself to our cohort in September 2007, noting that he came from a background that mixed computer science and creative writing: “I’ve had webby kinds of jobs for the past six years which started off kind of amorphous, but by now I think I’ve figured out I’m a web developer, not a designer. The line can be a fuzzy one. . . . In general, I’m good at code but not so much design. . . . Lately I’ve been writing hypertext. . . . If you’re curious, I post my stories on gimcrackd.com” (Klimas, IDIA student introductions). I still have slides and emails from projects we collaborated on at UB, including an orientation game designed for, of all things, a Motorola Razr phone. The pace with which technology would advance was not foreseeable even to us, immersed as we were in its potential. Looking back at these projects, Chris’s (and for that matter, my own) growing interest in accessibility in design is apparent.

The TweeCode/Twine Google Group dated from 2006 to 2018, at which point it was superseded by other Twine forums. Prior to Chris Klimas's own enrollment at UB, he was working on Tweebox 1.1, which was decidedly focused on interaction over aesthetics, but the discussion in the Google Group suggests he was starting to think about interface: "Right now the color scheme's pretty bland. This is sort of intentionally so—I didn't want it to be too distinctive—but even so, it would be nice to offer a couple of color variations. Either that or allow people to tweak the colors right from Tweebox, though that might be a bit too much complexity to give your average person" (Klimas, "What I'm Thinking About").

The "intentionally" bland look of this early Twine story format, Jonah, is not so different from the default look of the corporate web—but that would change. In an interview with Gamasutra, Chris Klimas cited the influence of the interaction design courses we both took at UB on Twine's move away from the computational interface to a graphical one: "[Twine] might have been my graduate thesis, originally, if I had the patience to complete one. . . . At the time, I had been experimenting with ways to create hypertext that were strongly code-oriented. I was studying interaction design, so Twine was my attempt to make something that would be friendly to people who were writers more than coders" (Alexander). I'd also suspect the impact of Eric Roberts's course on learning and interactive media, which we took together with others from the cohort. Sadly, nearly all records of that class are, for me at least, lost to time and poor memory.

The Twee documentation (which dates from Klimas's time at UB in 2009) reflects how different Twine was in this early, grad-school incarnation. It's decidedly geared toward hypertextual narrative, not games: "Keep in mind that hypertext is best described as a medium, not a genre. There can be hypertext fiction, nonfiction—even poetry. But in this document we'll talk about hypertext prose" (Klimas, "What Is Hypertext?"). Likewise, the discourse of the design documentation is grounded in electronic literature: "Links are the glue between passages. They are the equivalent of being told to turn to another page in a nonlinear book; in gamebooks, for example, you do this to make

decisions for the main character” (Klimas, “What is Hypertext?”). But this isn’t the only possible kind of link. Deena Larsen describes a whole taxonomy of links in “Fun Da Mentals: Rhetorical Devices for Electronic Literature.” The original “Fun Da Mentals” includes a coloring book section entitled “Drowning in the Distance” that invites the reader to connect imagery and passages with any tool that enables linking. Twine appears currently on the list of recommended tools alongside a number of other open-source tools for manipulating and remixing content (Larsen).

The barriers to entry for the original Twee were high, but that was not uncommon. At the time, the shift to accessibility in tools-focused discourse in the digital humanities was only beginning its rise, along with increased interest in bringing these types of platforms to new users. Both Chris and I were part of this interest and on the outskirts of the digital humanities community—where, in 2011, the reader called *Defining Digital Humanities* would include an essay where Stephen Ramsay observes that “learn to build” might be more useful than “learn to code” as a call for action in the digital humanities (Ramsay). He particularly points toward the usefulness of the THATCamp model in the sharing of methods of building—a space that Twine itself was heading toward, albeit slowly.

### THATCamp Games

The Humanities and Technology Camp—THATCamp—is a peculiar institution, worthy of its own book that will hopefully someday be written. It is an informal “unconference” gathering of digital humanists, convened by anyone with the will to organize and embrace the low- or no-cost model. It appears repeatedly in the stories of early digital-humanities community formation, best chronicled in the *Debates in the Digital Humanities* volumes (Gold and Klein). THATCamps vary wildly. Many THATCamp agendas included sessions about games, with enthusiasts such as myself sharing favorites and preaching their potential value to humanists everywhere, but for most, the very idea of games in the classroom still seemed challenging and out of reach.

In 2011, I co-organized the first THATCamp Games with Amanda Visconti at the University of Maryland, College Park. The camp was held in January 2012 during a snowstorm, with participants primarily including games scholars and digital humanists. Twine was so far under the radar at that point that even Klimas didn't discuss it: he offered a workshop on Flash game development with Flixel, an unrelated precursor of sorts to Twine in (relative) accessibility and usage if not in aesthetics. However, 2-D game development of this kind was a very different proposition than what would develop in Twine—Chris's boot camp description noted that "you should have some previous experience with object-oriented programming" (Salter and Visconti). The other boot camps were similarly positioned. Darius Kazemi foreshadowed the growing significance of HTML5 with a session on the Akihabara framework for 2-D games in HTML, which required programming experience; Bridget Blodgett (also from UB) focused on text-based games using Inform 7; John Murray looked at the Kinect Software Development Kit; James Morgan and Marek Kopolka looked at GameMaker 8 (back when there was a free version); and Todd Bryant shared strategies for modding *Civilization IV* (Salter and Visconti).

Looking back over the open schedule, many of the participants were looking for something like Twine—sessions on games and literature, narrative design, games for teaching arguments, queering games, and games and gender all foreshadowed Twine's eventual significance in educational games discourse. Twine was introduced but not yet dominant—reporting back after the event, Carly Kocurek, a game researcher and historian, noted, "I came back from THATCamp excited to play more with some of the tools I'd had the opportunity to work with, but also excited to spend some time with the tools I heard about but didn't get an opportunity to fiddle with hands-on at THATCamp Games: Flixel, Unity, Inform 7, and Twine, among others" (Kocurek).

Another attendee and designer, Sukey Argfored, posted observations on Inform 7 that echoed both its allure and the problems I've seen with it in class: "The nuts and bolts of creating a game in Inform 7 may be simplified for non-programmers, but they are still far too complicated to really learn in an hour and a half session" (Argfored).



We really should have held a Twine boot camp, but it says a lot that here, on the brink of 2012, even Chris Klimas himself didn't propose one for this venue. The explosion of Twine games (which would in turn help push the open-source project forward and create many of the resources on which Twine developers currently rely) wouldn't happen until a little later. I started at this time pointing people to Twine, but more the digital humanities crowd than the games crowd: in my own world of graphics-focused coursework, with students demanding better ways to build zombie shooters, there didn't seem to be a place for Twine in educational games discourse—yet. For small projects and subversive gameplay, we had Flash, which was highly visual, relatively quick and well supported, and easy to circulate on all the pre-iPhone platforms we could imagine.

### Glorious Trainwrecks and the Intervention of Anna Anthropy

While our THATCamp-ers were learning Inform 7, elsewhere, others thinking inventively about games were discovering Twine. The main page of Glorious Trainwrecks opens with a provocation: “This site is about nothing, if it is not about getting off your ass and creating. Wikipedia claims that [people] used to stage trainwrecks (with empty trains, of course) for the amusement of the general population. Would the world not be a better place if we brought this tradition back?” (Glorious Trainwrecks). The site turned ten years old in April 2017, and since 2008, the moderators have maintained a list of rapid game development tools on which Twine features second (after Klik N Play, a graphical game tool currently described as “free, terribly buggy, doesn't work on 64-bit, beloved by all”). The parenthetical for Twine is more positive: “free, open-source, creates web-based text games with a nice no-programming GUI interface.” The list was last updated in 2012 and still links to Gimcrack'd, Chris's now defunct site that used to host the Tweek wiki as well as his own work. Leon Arnott (maintainer of the Harlowe story format) turned the site into a resource for Twine poetics and practices with a series of blog posts dating back to 2012 and covering topics

including Twine page transitions and CSS tricks, adding in external libraries such as jQuery and extending the built-in JavaScript support with more dynamic elements.

Glorious Trainwrecks is home to one facet of the rapid game-making community that wasn't Twine's initial audience but would come to define it, as Chris credited in our interview:

I initially thought of [Twine] as this thing that was for . . . serious writing, I guess, though serious writing is obviously a loaded term. It wasn't that I thought [Twine work] was somehow better than a game, it was more that I couldn't see how you build a game out of it, originally. And then everybody came along and proved me wrong, basically. And that was the other piece of it. I had zero awareness of the indie game scene at the time. That was the thing that Anna Anthropy really recognized, I think. I honestly credit her. . . . We'll go fifty-fifty for Twine's success. Because she saw something and was in a digital community I had no relationship to. (see appendix I)

In June 2012, Anna Anthropy was interviewed in *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* by Cara Ellison, who published the interview as a Twine game: after a nod to GameMaker (which has since gone very commercial), Anna Anthropy plugged Twine: “The other thing I recommend to people who are making games for the first time is Twine, which is a really simple tool for making basically choose your own adventure sort of things—very simple text stories—click here to do this—and it makes games as web pages that you can put online” (Ellison). This, along with similar Anna Anthropy interviews and posts, was the introduction to Twine for many.

My interest in Twine had already been piqued by these discussions, and I was rapidly working on my own (woefully bad) experiments. I found inspiration and discovered a better entry point into the community after a post from Porpentine in the Twine Google Group on August 11, 2012: “i've been working in Twine for a while and recently discovered this group. Just posting a collection of the games i've made along with my favorites from other people in the indie game scene

to show that Twine isn't dead. There's a variety of tones and styles on display here so there's sure to be something you enjoy" (Porpentine, "collection of Twine games from me and other people"). The list included many of Porpentine's own works, as well as Kitty Horrorshow's horror and a number of romantic and historical vignettes. Many of these remain powerful, teachable works, and they also demonstrated early on Twine's range—from "surreal" to "dripping horror" and beyond. I am a fan of *Batman Is Screaming*, described here by its creator as "tiny, surreal"—it presents the strangest merger of fan fiction tropes, Twine, and body horror I've yet seen. It remains understudied, probably because of the connection to that "other" woman-driven, frequently queer, online community of storytelling: fandom. More on that and other unusual works later.

Many others would find Twine during this surge thanks to Porpentine, who would quickly become one of Twine's most respected creators. In an essay she has since deleted that we quote here for its formative influence and power, Porpentine described the appeal of Twine's blank page as something other than the white page of the word processor. She particularly noted the value of Twine's original aesthetics, which I still appreciate myself—the black background of Twine 1.X's default story format lends itself to a certain atmosphere, while the chunked passage formats encourage thinking through fragments rather than confronting the whole. As she observed,

So many people tell me their stories start to get personal no matter how they start out.

Twine's default color scheme is blue on black, not black on white. Black on white is daylight, it's mundane. Twine invites us to write our secrets into the night. We can make it light in a line of CSS, but that the default is inverted feels non-trivial to me.

More significantly, when we write in natural language, as opposed to code, we're in the element of the diary, the notepad, the confessional.

Our engines shape our output. We can't pretend that the history of game design has been designing on a blank canvas or a white page. The history of game design has been working with a canvas that

screams at you and changes shape and rejects your strokes if they aren't just right—working with machines. (Porpentine, “Creation under Capitalism”)

Published in November 2012, this essay exemplified everything that would make Twine important. Prior to my focus on Twine, I was interested in another tool that has this “personal” element, Adventure Game Studio. However, Adventure Game Studio is far more difficult for development, and the graphical narratives made with it frequently take their lead from commercial adventure games of the past rather than from text-based games. It and other genre-driven engines force the user/creator into a certain trajectory, demanding the embrace of dominant mechanics, while Twine offers the freedom of the creator-defined verb—the link—over any other interface.

### Twine down the Rabbit Hole

As Twine became hip among the alternative gaming community, I was inspired by its throwback aesthetic to start playing with it not for game-making but for scholarship. The first time I used Twine for my own scholarly work was in the construction of *Alice in Dataland*, a project that began as part of Anvil Academic's abandoned (as far as I know) *Built Upon* series in digital scholarship. I combined Twine with other old-school hypertextual play throughout the project, using animated GIFs, simple canvas animation, and procedural play on classic forms such as Montfort's procedurally generated poem *Taroko Gorge*—all to explore Alice's rabbit hole as a metaphor for remediation, remediated.

The project was not at all what the editorial board of Anvil Academic had in mind—their vision of digital humanities scholarship was data-driven, database-heavy, and “modern,” not web-nostalgic. A year after the initial announcement of my project and others being accepted, the editorial board posted a commentary on the project's failure, though that commentary foreshadowed something larger: the failure of the entire series, which as of 2020 has not published a volume, perhaps due to their emphasis on “production values: sophistication of interface

design, complexity and power of the underlying software engine, and other features that (intuitively, at least) fall under the heading of technology rather than scholarship or intellectual content. The lone author, in other words, working without the support of a digital scholarship lab, finds it hard to compete when work is evaluated both for its technical sophistication and its intellectual content” (Moody). This is certainly accurate; particularly the demands of data-intensive work and complex development have only grown in overhead.

But such commentary also echoes some of the criticisms frequently aimed at Twine—criticisms that can be one of the platform’s most important virtues. The lone creator, making work in hypertext, may release on games platforms but will never have work that echoes the technical style of their storefront companions. Twine creators frequently don’t find a home for their games alongside the corporate marketplaces, which similarly forefront “production values” but instead have played a role in shaping new spaces for personal games. Similarly, I found my lone, strange Twine scholarly project a more suitable home in *Kairos*, a journal dedicated to multimodal rhetoric and thus full of experimental digital scholarship exploring the form. Here I found the same echoes of what Twine-makers were noting in games: Twine games, intensely personal, developed by the “lone author” in most cases, were easy to reject, to label as not-games—and would become central to the discourse of game or not game that was about to become much more than an academic debate.

### Gamergate, or How Twine Helped Fuel a Culture War

In 2013, Zoë Quinn released a Twine game called *Depression Quest*. Quinn also broke up with an abusive boyfriend. The two events together would fuel the outbreak that we now call “Gamergate,” which was essentially an onslaught of toxic masculinity, online warfare, and misogyny that would send several of its targets into hiding while fundamentally changing the discourse of gaming culture and game studies as a field. It put some academics into a hostile spotlight, fueled by the rhetoric of “saving” games from the onslaught of “feminists” and

“social justice warriors” bent on ruining games for cisgender, heterosexual white men.

The outcomes are a testament to the deep understanding on the part of Zoë Quinn’s ex of what makes men on the internet angry. The still-unfolding incident has been well documented elsewhere, but Twine’s role as an inciting platform, and eventually a platform for commentary and resistance, is not so well known. Quinn recently published a detailed account of their experiences in and after Gamergate in *Crash Override*, covering both the roots of the movement in domestic abuse and the calculated attacks of their ex-partner and the years of coordinated harassment that followed. In that work, Quinn never mentions Twine but does discuss the works it enabled (they used Twine for both *Depression Quest* and the *Crash Override* resources they later developed for victims of similar attacks).

During Gamergate, Klimas came under attack as the developer of Twine and alerted me when my name showed up with his in the discussion on Gamergate forums. I’d already linked the affordances of Twine to the Gamergate movement in some early talks where I’d been working through the significance of *Depression Quest*—as Quinn’s work drew attention to the ways their ex used the existing groups of misogynistic, angry white supremacist groups (the same Donald Trump’s campaign would tap into only a few years later), I was interested in what it was about Twine itself, not just the content produced on Twine, that added fuel to that culture war.

As a result of giving a talk of this kind at a conference that also included an inclusivity-focused Wikipedia edit-a-thon, a participant would put Zoë Quinn’s work on Wikipedia. Thus Klimas’s name and mine would become linked by the research of the same aforementioned posters mentioned. The initial message from Klimas (with the appropriate title “quinnspiracy”), dated October 2, 2014, directed my attention to an *Escapist* magazine forum, where my name had popped up as part of an elaborate conspiracy. For a while, I screenshotted mentions (and put all my accounts under two-factor authentication as a preemptive defense mechanism), but it amounted to very little other than a message from a colleague: “Wait, you’re part of a vast conspiracy to

bring down gaming from the all-powerful throne of academia and you didn't tell me?! I am so disappointed in you. Thanks for the heads up.”

The conspiracy post noted my overlap with Klimas at UB as well as the presence of Twine in my courses, linking us in an elaborate conspiracy:

In summation, you have an edit-a-thon hosted and facilitated by a Wikipedia admin who has been found editing for hire in the past. During that edit-a-thon someone registers an account at Stierch's urging and creates a bio for Zoe Quinn, less than an hour after Stierch writes some mocking edits on her page about video games linking to some social justice-style attack on gamer culture. Stierch protects Quinn's article from deletion but does not remove blatantly promotional language. The edit-a-thon was taking place at the university where the creator of Twine, the software Quinn's game uses, works and one of the other participants in the event that included the edit-a-thon attended the same university as the creator of Twine at the same time as the creator of Twine where she wrote about emerging software useful for creating interactive fiction and has since promoted Twine heavily in her work and at seminars. It is definitely a very shady situation. (link deliberately omitted)

I apologize for the rather lengthy quote, but I believe it demonstrates something essential in how the Gamergate discourse twisted community—among both academics and game-makers and those of us in-between—into conspiracy. The same story would later be added to the Gamergate wiki as part of the entry on Wikipedia. Clearly, I could have started and ended the history of my own involvement with Twine here. Whoever did this research paid more attention to my timeline than I had, though, in some ways, this autoethnography is its own rejoinder—a history focused on connections, not manipulation.

It was around this time that my entire scholarly focus changed.

This sounds like an exaggeration, but it's really not. Since Gamergate, I've cut down on my participation in games-centered research and spaces and instead focused on electronic literature, social media,

and particularly how open platforms and communities can provide spaces for resistance and expression. Taking a step back from games also meant looking at the culture I'd long been part of as a so-called geek and examining the role we'd collectively played in shaping this moment.

This political bent started to inform my Twine workshops and my larger scholarship, which I shared in a session entitled "Lit Misbehaving" at the Modern Language Association (MLA) convention in 2014. The Digital Rhetoric Collaborative write-up of the session noted this focus: "Given the sexual harassment that women encounter when trying to form an identity as a game developer, Salter suggested that Twine has potential to change the definition of games and enrich the voices we hear in the gaming community" (Sullivan). Such write-ups (and indeed, my own work and the work of other feminist scholars at this moment) insufficiently grounded the importance of trans women and queer creators in leading the way, an omission in my own early work that I hope to remedy in this project.

Amplified by the hashtags of the conference and the realities of the moment, that year's MLA panel also ended up the subject of a weird blog post and YouTube video (edd77) designed to encourage criticism from the Gamergate loyalists, of which my personal favorite is a line-by-line repost of the account with commentary from cool\_boy\_mew reproduced in part here: "All in all, the feminists are the ones invading our space and making everything worse in their passage. These so called 'heroes' of feminism are completely toxic and the feminists academics are a complete mess. . . . We are not the monsters you make it out to be. If anything YOU are the monster. I've never seen so much bullshit disguised by a supposed drive to do good" (Irvine).

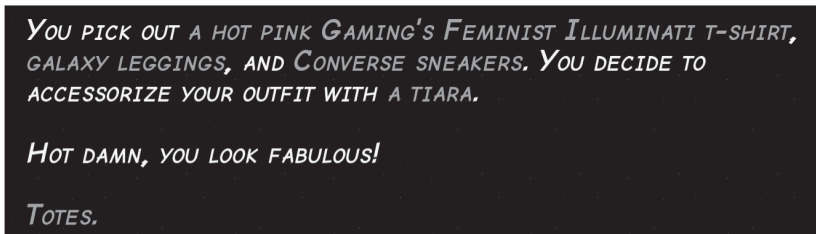
So obviously, after this type of scintillating commentary, I and all the other "monstrous" feminists in games gave up and went home.

### Twine during Gamergate

Twine didn't quiet down after Gamergate started—it got louder. Several game-makers used it to comment on the moment, with one of the most powerful coming from D. Squinkifer via their game *Quing's*



*Quest VII: The Death of Videogames.* The game was released as part of Ruin Jam 2014, a jam “open to anyone and everyone who has been, is being, or plans to be accused of ruining the games industry” (Sandel). The game (shown in figure 10) featured an over-the-top narrative inspired by classic adventure games, featuring a narrator exiled from Planet Videogames following the Gamergate-analogous Culture War.



**Figure 10:** Like many people, I went out and bought the T-shirt

2014 was also the first year Twine entries outnumbered parser interactive fiction pieces in the annual XYZZY finalists. The shift from the relatively obscure influence of the parser, with its resemblance to the command line and its reliance upon an understanding of a verb-based interaction system, was received with mixed reactions at the time. While both hypertext and parser-based interactive fiction already had—and continue to have—a long history, this shift also served to bring new voices to the competition. As Klimas commented, “There is no doubt that Twine and its kind represent a different paradigm of interactive fiction. But I think there’s more opportunity here for devotees of parser IF than there is ill omen. Easy for me to say, right? I created Twine. Of course I think this is a positive development” (Klimas, “War, Pestilence, Famine”). Six years later, the mix of tools suggests that Chris was correct and there is no winner—Twine and Inform 7 coexist, both bringing different opportunities to interactive fiction.

During this time of fallout and increased Twine visibility, I was invited to serve as part of the editorial board for the “Electronic Literature Collection—Volume 3,” or ELC3, the latest volume in a series of compendiums compiled by the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO).

I wasn't quite sure what I was doing there, so I decided to make the most of it and get Twine represented within the discourse of electronic literature. This includes *Quing's Quest VII*, despite—in fact, in part because of—the dig at electronic literature within its text: when the player suggests migrating to “planet hypertext,” a character responds, “Is that even a real planet, comrade? I thought it was a satellite. Is it inhabitable, even?” (Squinkifer). The game is no kinder to academia: “You'd be willing to climb all the way up that ivory tower, comrade? Wow, I guess we're in a more desperate situation than I thought.”

Despite this skepticism of an admittedly often-closed ivory tower, several Twine authors agreed to be part of the collection, as shown in the index of the Twine keyword. We addressed our goals in including these works in the introduction to the volume: “In the *Electronic Literature Collection Volume 3*, we knew we wanted to represent the vital work happening in Twine, which hadn't really existed as a platform at the release of the ELCv2. However, this posed many challenges, including the problem of asking people who perhaps wouldn't identify with this research community or even the label ‘electronic literature’ to include their work in an ongoing open-access space. While most Twine works are released for free, several creators have been working to find ways to receive at least some payment for their work, or to leverage projects towards a career” (Boluk et al.).

The careful wording of this statement reflects some of my own unease about potentially colonizing Twine work by annexing it as “electronic literature.” While Klimas clearly had that framework in mind while creating the tool, it is far less visible in the current work or ongoing communal discourse. The Twine works featured reflected some of the works that had most influenced my own view of how games could be reimaged. *Quing's Quest VII* appears alongside Anna Anthropy's *Hunt for the Gay Planet* and Porpentine's *With Those We Love Alive*, both of which we will discuss at length in later chapters.

In an interview following the publication of the ELC3, lead editor Leonardo Flores commented on how this type of work challenges existing definitions of electronic literature: “We also need to account for the ubiquity of computing and digital media. In the early days of the field,

the distinction between print and digital writing was a convenient and rhetorically powerful trope. But now that most contemporary writing is already ‘born digital’ (though designed for print-based interfaces) its digitality has lost power as an indicator. This raises a few questions: how much of an engagement with digital and electronic media is enough for something to be considered e-lit? And what distinguishes e-literature from computationally intensive works such as videogames? How e-literary is a work of e-lit?” (Offenhardt and Flores).

I appreciated the double-sidedness of this disruption. The question of Twine’s inclusion had the potential to challenge definitions of electronic literature with the same force as it has challenged the definition of games. Positioning Twine in the sphere of electronic literature—a space we both, with various levels of comfort, inhabit—can be reductive but also valuable for expanding the dialogue around the form. To revisit the early discussion of Twine as a platform and particularly that lingering question of “What is Twine for, anyways?” one way of understanding Twine is through Flores’s lens of third-generation electronic literature—a tool for disrupting some of the field’s assumptions and points of entry.

### Teaching Twine

Throughout these various shifts in the tides of electronic literature and games and their corresponding rocking of Twine’s boat, I spent a lot of time teaching Twine. Workshops that I used to teach with board games to avoid procedural barriers to design were rethought in Twine, and I introduced the tool to hundreds of students in the large courses I taught at UCF. My workshops have primarily reached humanities educators and librarians, who in turn often take Twine to their students in various disciplines.

Alexis Lothian commented on Twine’s usefulness for teaching after using Twine with her students following an introduction in one of these workshops, noting that “Twine’s structure of branching choices lends itself really well to explorations of the ways that our day to day choices are limited by dominant power structures” (Condis). She offered the

example of a game exploring the experience of a nonbinary student continually asked to fit themselves into gendered boxes that made no room for them—a metaphor of play that particularly resonates with me, as most games (and spaces) still make no space for those of us more comfortable in-between.

Questions of accessibility more broadly are encoded in the choice of Twine over other more visual platforms. Former IFTF board member Flourish Klink noted that the organization's first two goals are to build a program to help sustain the Twine community over the next twenty-plus years and seek solutions for making interactive fiction games more accessible to people with disabilities: "There are many game genres that are difficult to make accessible . . . not because of any failure on the part of the developers, but because they simply require sight. On the other hand, it should be easy for [players with disabilities] to play an interactive fiction game . . . because interactive fiction is usually developed by indies who don't have experience with accessibility, sometimes that falls by the wayside. We plan to create resources to help those developers, and to work with projects like Twine, Inform, etc to make sure they have good accessibility tools" (Francis).

I explored this in a collaboration with UCF faculty and students engaged in a cultural exchange program with students from a school for low-vision students in Russia. They developed a game that combined large text and audio narrations—recorded themselves—with keyboard input replacing the need to touch a particular quadrant of the screen.

Working with Twine is usually part of my prototyping or rapid development workflow rather than my more complex work, simply because most things I want to make ultimately demand breaking out of some of the Twine aesthetics. I also resisted Twine 2.X initially (but have now embraced it), in part thanks to the aesthetic changes—the online editor in particular is too cheerful for me. I've spoken to others quietly about the use of Twine to create works that have no particular audience. The fragmented form lends itself to journaling or exploration.

I am continually impressed by the ability of writers to use Twine to respond to moments movingly and quickly. A recent standout that quickly sparked discourse among academics is *September 7th, 2020*,

a stark work by Cait S. Kirby, released in the summer following the initial wave of COVID-19. It places the player on a reopened campus, confronting day-to-day challenges:

You raise your hand. Your professor motions that it will be a few minutes. She's trying to answer other questions, but each question takes longer than usual due to masks and social distancing.

While you're waiting, you look around. You see that a neighboring student is not wearing a mask.

Do you motion for the student to put their mask on or pull your own mask tighter? (Kirby)

By asking the player to make impossible choices in the position of a high-risk student, the work pushes back on the choices universities are already making for students in the name of preserving a traditional experience of education. It is the best of Twine: personal and cultural, making an immediate impact in a charged moment of debate.

As we move out from the personal and gaze on Twine as a cultural object, we believe this divergence provides a useful framing to remember: Twine is personal, and our relationship with it is continually reshaped by the moment in which we use it. Twine is a platform but also a happening, and what's happening around Twine influences the expectations of those who pick it up and renew it. The future (and present) of Twine is in this trajectory of influence. As we will discuss later, Twine works now emerge into interfaces and forms ranging from print books to Netflix films to Unity games. Twine can be a beginning and an end (as we examine in chapter T-5, which delves further into queer Twine, camp, and the evolution of the GeoCities aesthetic), and it can be a beginning to new ends and new platforms.

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