CHAPTER T-3

Twine and the Question of Literature

Legacy?
Pfffffffffffffffffffffft!
—Xalavier Nelson Jr.

Whoever

Twine is generally described as a tool for telling stories that involve what Espen Aarseth calls “non-trivial” engagement or, as it is familiarly known, interactivity (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 2). Writers using Twine have made and continue to make compositions of striking vision and sophistication, covering a range of expressive possibilities. There are richly conceived science fiction stories like Jedediah Berry’s *Fabricationist Dewit Remakes the World* (Berry) and Tom McHenry’s *Tonight Dies the Moon* (McHenry). There are deep excursions into fantasy, such as Kevin Snow’s *Beneath Floes* (Snow), Porpentine’s *Howling Dogs* (Porpentine, *Howling*) and *With Those We Love Alive* (Porpentine, *With Those*), the latter a subject of this chapter. Some works interrogate terms and techniques of interactive storytelling, as in Michael Lutz’s *My Father’s Long, Long Legs* (Lutz), which visually tunnels into narrative, and D. Squinkifer’s *Quing’s Quest VII: The Death of Videogames* (Squinkifer), which

asks hard questions about the putative ends of play. Twine writers have created parodic tours de force, including Porpentine's *Ultra Business Tycoon III* (Porpentine, *Ultra Business Tycoon III*), Kris Ligman's *You Are Jeff Bezos* (Ligman), and Jon Bois's *Bill Belichick Offseason Simulator* (Bois).

The appeal of Twine crosses literary generations, as in the work of John McDaid—to which we are coming—or Richard Holeton's Twine-based autobiography (Holeton). Resonance and references can implicate nondigital work as well. *Tonight Dies the Moon* opens with a sardonic quotation from David Barthelme; *Howling Dogs* begins with a long passage from Kenzaburo Oe; *You Are Jeff Bezos* is both a striking piece of social commentary and an homage to Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

This chapter asks a controversial question: *Can Twine works be thought about as literature?* In some ways, the obvious answer might be no. Many if not most Twine creators call their works games, not fictions, essays, or plays.[1] As Astrid Ensslin and others have pointed out, game and story need not be exclusive categories, and the categorization itself can be questioned (Ensslin). Darius Kazemi, Twine writer and game critic, has wisdom on this point:

> I guess what I'm trying to say is: if games AREN'T working for you as a tool for creative expression, don't give up on games, but also try some other stuff. Don't try and bend ideas to fit into the mold of "game." MAYBE try and bend "game" to fit to your idea, that might work (I'm thinking of Twine games here, which bend the concept of game so much that it makes traditional game designers cranky that the authors have the audacity to use the word "game." This also works in the other direction: please think about whether your Twine game should be an essay instead.) (Kazemi)

Arguably, Twine works bend more than just the concept of *game*. They ring changes on culture generally and writing in particular. For

1 The term *poem* might remain in play. Porpentine refers to Pierre Chevalier's *Destroy / Wait* as a "poem" in a comment. Anthropy has a category for "Game Poems" on her website. Outside of the Twine world, Bogost has published a series of Atari games meant to be understood as poems (Bogost).

that reason, they are hard to write about. As we have said, one of the things that makes this book such a strange combination of impulses is the way Twine sits between cultural identities—story and game, art and entertainment, personal statement and commercial production. Categories are not good tools for thick description. The emergence of Twine as a creative platform, itself part of a software subculture that includes things like interactive fiction, the demoscene, e-poetry, and metagaming, is, as Johanna Drucker says of all digital writing, less entity than event (Drucker). The event is still in progress.

Twine creations are many things. Their frequent use of meaningful choices brings them very close to games, as some have defined them.[2] They may include images, sound, and temporal effects that make them comparable to film.[3] For the most part, though, Twine works use words to describe characters and tell stories. This begins to look like literature, though the recognition may be more of resemblance than identity.

As our epigraph from independent game designer Xalavier Nelson Jr. reminds us, people who make things like Twine games often distrust terms like *legacy*. These creators are part of an active, vital art movement that lives very much in its early century moment, still unfolding and far from conclusion. And yet, as Nelson went on to say in the same talk, "I'm going to DIE one day"—not for a long, long while, we hope, but the sentiment is as real as it is universal (Nelson). We all live in time, bringing anxieties to any moment. The discomfort is twofold: legacy points backward as well as forward. We inherit as well as bequeath. The problem of the timeline can't be dismissed, even with a much-extended *Pffft*.

Trying to wind Twine works around some traditional literary axis may be as risky as filing jazz under American popular music or calling the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) cinematic. Those descriptions

2 See the discussion of this criterion in Juul's *Half-Real*, Myers's *Games Are Not*, and Consalvo and Paul's *Real Games*. The question of what is and is not a game has been vexed by the Gamergate culture war. Here as elsewhere in this book we refer to various constructions nonexclusively. Meaningful choices are one way to define games, but not the only way.

3 See chapter T-5, where we discuss Claudia Lo's reading of *Queers in Love at the End of the World* via slow cinema.

are valid, but they need unpacking. Technically and aesthetically, the digital fantasies of the MCU lie a long way from the heyday of smoke-filled movie houses and celluloid film.[4] It might be more accurate to say, as film theorists have largely decided, that digitally rendered works redefine cinema (Gaudreault and Marion 154). As for jazz, it is every bit as American as chattel slavery. It is the signature of a nation that should never have been, or ever again be, dedicated to whiteness. Both cases teach us this: time keeps running, but there's no escape from history.

Over multiple generations, any art is a dynamic system. Its state will change both in gradual increments and abrupt, shearwise jolts. Such disruptions involve both memory and forgetting, and their tension generates waves of irony. My first lesson in this effect came when I was very young, listening to a song by Paul Simon called "A Simple Desultory Philippic (or How I Was McNamara'd into Submission)." First written in 1965 and revised for the album *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme*, the song is a broad, talking-blues send-up of Bob Dylan (Simon and Garfunkel). In an unmistakable twang, Simon reels off topical jokes on the way to a final epiphany:

I've paid all the dues I'm going to pay
'Cause I learned the truth from Lenny Bruce
That all of my wealth won't buy me health
So I smoke a pint of tea a day

I probably heard these words in 1969 or 1970. Like many products of the sixties, the "Philippic" aged too fast. Even then, it needed decoding—Lenny Bruce, celebrated bad boy of standup; Robert S. McNamara, major architect of the Vietnam war; tea, another word for pot; but what else was Simon going on about? At that moment, Dylan the protest-hero felt even more mythical than the recently broken-up Beatles. My barely teenage self couldn't process the cultural grudge, and the second part of the song made things murkier:

4 The exquisitely classical screen kiss that ends *Avengers: Endgame* proves this by exception.

I knew a man, his brain was so small
He couldn't think of nothing at all
Not the same as you and me
He doesn't dig poetry
He's so unhip that when you say Dylan
He thinks you're talking about Dylan Thomas
Whoever he was

Though it probably explains a lot, please set aside the tiny tragedy of a seventies teen learning stale material. Focus instead on Simon's cultural unpeeling—"Dylan Thomas, whoever he was"—but remember, no internet. In 1970, if you were lucky and relatively privileged, a parent or teacher might tag the Welsh poet (1914–53) and quote something more interesting than "Do not go gently." You could then appreciate the shade in Simon's lyrics, the way they call out a counterculture hooded in historical blindness. At the very least, you could feel the divide between old world and new, even as, confusingly, you sensed *the truly hip* denied it.

History favors convergence. Fifty years later, we had the hyperirony of Bob Dylan's 2016 Nobel Prize for Literature, desultorily accepted a year later, which put the business of 1965/1966 in rather a different light. Dylan/Thomas: "assuming that's a distinction you observe, heh heh," to quote that other prophet of the terminal sixties, Thomas Pynchon (Pynchon 411). Cultural fissures inevitably appear, displacing now from then, but countervailing forces bend toward atonement.

What, you may ask, do these vinyl memories of the very late sixties have to do with Twine writing, born and bred in the next century? It is a question of history, if not legacy. The Twine platform and the writers who distinguish it are at least convergently millennial, but the story to which they belong begins well before 2001. The code resources on which Twine is based, HTML and JavaScript, date from the late 1980s and mid-1990s. The internet protocols that underlie them were indeed mid- to late-sixties productions (see Galloway). There is a history here.

Art tends to involve precedents. The kind of storytelling commonly done with Twine has three main ancestors: game books (choose-your-own-adventure stories), parser-based text adventures

(interactive fictions), and hypertext fictions. A popular novel with optional reading schemes was published in 1930 (Hopkins and Webster). Game books for younger readers became broadly popular in the 1970s (Nikolajeva). Interactive fiction made its debut in procedural narratives like *Oregon Trail* in 1971 (Rawitch, Heinemann, and Dillenberger) and *Colossal Cave Adventure* (Crowther) five years later.[5] Hypertext fiction began in the mid-1980s with Judy Malloy's *Uncle Roger* (Malloy) and Michael Joyce's *afternoon: a story* (Joyce, *afternoon*).

Opinions differ about whether these works belong to literary history. At a certain point in the early history of digital fiction, it was fashionable to accuse them of debasing literature (see most notoriously Birkerts). Nonetheless, figures associated with hypertext, such as Joyce, Shelley Jackson, and John McDaid, have identified mainly as fiction writers. Montfort aligns interactive fiction with the ancient poetic genre of the riddle (Montfort 14). Aarseth argued for an "ergodic literature" that includes interactive fiction and word-based virtual environments (Aarseth, *Cybertext*). After the turn of the century, however, Aarseth helped establish the independence of computer games from literature and other prior arts (Aarseth, "Computer Game Studies").

These uncertainties also affect the Twine world. Some influential Twine creators moved into game design after bad experiences in college creative writing programs and game-design academies (see Anthropy's comments in *Rise* 95). After Gamergate, Twine work has been strongly associated with independent, insurgent game creation, especially queer gaming. As merritt k says in the indispensable manifesto/anthology *Videogames for Humans*, "Many of the figures who have risen to prominence in Twine circles are trans women. That trans women are recognized as the leaders of an artistic scene is a fact worth appreciating in its own right" (merritt k 12). We will say more about these connections to resistant and alternative culture in the rest of the book, especially chapter T-4. The present chapter looks the other way across this divide, connecting Twine works at least tentatively to a literary ethos—though with the present very much in mind.

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5 As Salter points out, this millennium-adjacent cohort is often described as "the *Oregon Trail* generation." See https://mashable.com/2015/05/21/oregon-trail-generation/.

In this, we are responding to another point raised by merritt k, who hopes to promote "more communication and crossover between fringe game design and literary communities" (merritt k 18). Communication never comes without the risk of misunderstanding or disrespect, especially in a cultural crisis. We need also to remember Brice's poignant survey of the literary landscape, already cited but worth repeating here: "Boundaries, bones of old men before us, are only there to be transgressed" (Brice). This chapter unearths various bones and pays some attention to old men, real and imagined. It does so, we hope, in the spirit of connection merritt k evokes—though this is hard. Reaching across historical gaps creates that effect Jacques Derrida punningly called "hauntology." In doing hauntology, we need "to learn to live *with* ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But *with them*. No *being-with* the other, no *socius* without this *with* that makes *being-with* in general more enigmatic than ever for us. And this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations" (Derrida xviii).

Ghosts pose a serious problem for rationalist-materialist theories of existence—much the same problem, Derrida also taught, that lies in language itself. There is no "genuine *being-with* the other," no way past the enigma of otherness—*whoever he was*—and yet we persist in naming names. We tell ghost stories. Like cinema's illusion of motion, the act of naming invokes false presence and dubious ancestries. Unto every Dylan, there will be some Thomas—doubtful if not doubting, and technically speaking no relation, except that in language and literature, there is nothing but relation, however vexed. The house of Twine is haunted.

Final Fictions and Delta-T

Postmodern haunting is complicated. Our ghosts no longer show up in the Dickensian holiday three-pack, but come instead in trickier, fractal numbers. The return of the repressed may cross hauntological registers in strange, Escher-like loops. These radical effects are captured in a work called *We Knew the Glass Man*, written by John G. McDaid and

crafted in Twine with the assistance of his son, Jack McDaid (McDaid, *Glass Man*; all other citations of this work are given in the text by passage name). The title, which refers to Wallace Stevens's "Asides on the Oboe," names an ancestral presence of literary modernism whose effect on the work we will explore (Stevens). In its own way, McDaid's *Glass Man* recapitulates the Dylan/Thomas logic, folding Stevens's modernist abstractions over other cultural signatures—science fiction, psychedelics, occultism, garage-band rock, and, crucially for our purposes, Twine.

There is a literal haunting in the work. To echo our earlier catchphrase, the signature of *Glass Man* might well be "whoever he was," with notable slippage under the pronoun. The question applies most directly to Tyrell Rand Walker, the main haunt of the story. Walker ("Ty") was a friend of the unnamed narrator from their days at Syracuse University. As old readers of Sunday comics will recognize (see Falk and Herman), his surname might as well be Phantom, the Ghost-Who-Walks. His given name echoes the maker of the replicants in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* and in shortened form suggests connection or binding ("tie"). The middle name remains mysterious—Ayn Rand? Janice Rand from *Star Trek*? "Rand" for *random* (as we will see)? This guesswork seems appropriate, as Mr. Walker is made of mysteries. He seems to have died six times under different circumstances. These details are given in various funereal passages of *Glass Man*:

1. Drowned in the surf off Cape May, New Jersey ("Unitarian Church in Fayetteville")
2. Fell to his death from a water tower while tripping on acid ("Eighteen"; see also the passage "Remain in Light," where the same scene ends without the fall)
3. Drove into a tree in Prospect Park, Brooklyn ("It Was Quick")
4. Blown up on TWA Flight 800, July 17, 1996 ("Beach at Coney Island")
5. Suffocated in his sleep by a fire that destroys 219 Clarendon Street ("A Jar in Tennessee")
6. Died at home of undisclosed causes in 2016 ("Cemetery of Last Resort")

This narrative uncertainty registers how, in every sense of the phrase, *times have changed*. Heterocosms, inconsistent or causally divergent world-models, were popular in the last century. We could point to postmodernist fictions, from Virginia Woof's *Orlando* to Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, or just as plausibly to popular entertainments, from *Rashomon* to *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*. In this new century, multiversal thinking seems to be on tap wherever stories are told. Hypertext fiction is certainly part of this phenomenon, and Twine along with it. Because hypertext usually implies a graph, we might begin by reading from the map:

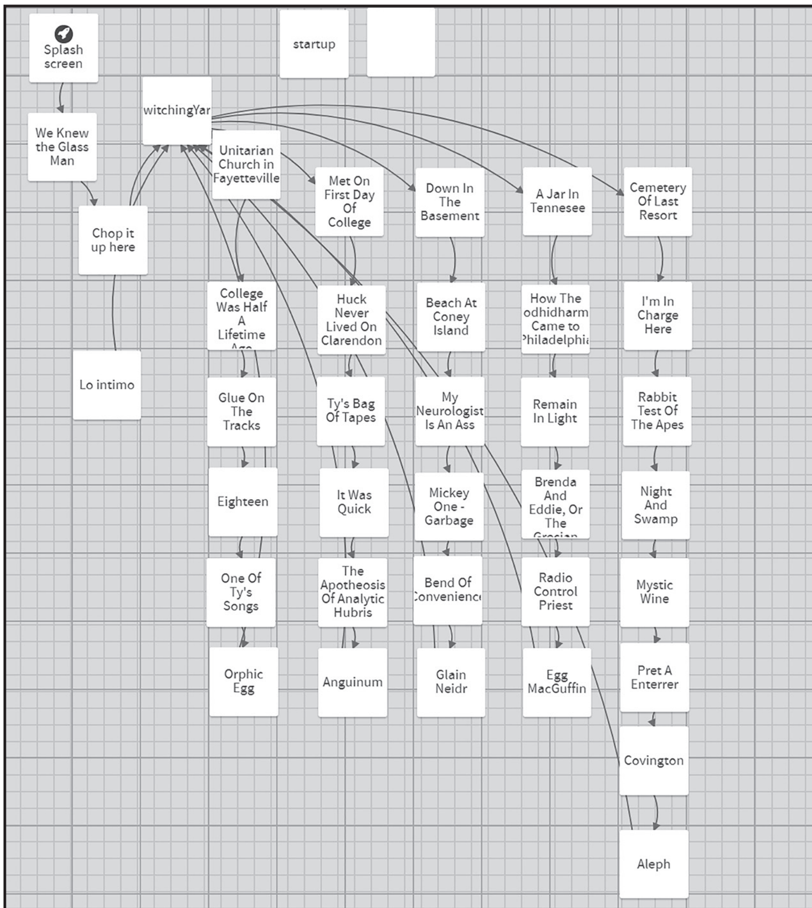

Figure 13: Structure map of *We Knew the Glass Man*

This is the story structure of *We Knew the Glass Man* as it appears when the output HTML file is opened in Twine. Much can be learned about the design of the story from this graph. There is an initial track from "Splash Screen" (far left) to a passage from which many lines emanate, with an equal number returning. This passage is called "Nighttime in the Switching Yard," echoing the title of a Warren Zevon song. Zevon is another of the whoevers haunting this story. To the left of the Switching Yard lie five linear tracks, each containing at least one of the death scenarios (the first track includes both "Unitarian Church in Fayetteville" and "Eighteen"). At far left are two passages without linking lines—and though they are important, we will pass over them for the moment.

Each of the extended tracks ends with a passage that loops back to the Yard. These ends-of-the-line have numinous names: "Orphic Egg," "Anguinum," "Glain Neidr," "Aleph," and the definitive "Egg MacGuffin." Each passage begins with the same sentence, then diverges. They describe a relic passed down to Ty Walker from Arthur "Buddy" Newkirk (more about him presently). The nature of this object is hazy: it is an ancient Greek magic stone, a Druidic talisman (twice), a chip off the Egg Stone of Glastonbury, or a totem of unknown properties and origin, vaguely recalled. The echoing endpoints round out the plan shared by all five lines—begin with a reminiscence, arrive at death and a funeral, finish with the arcane object.

McDaid alludes more than once to Jorge Luis Borges's story "The Aleph," but the structure of *Glass Man* also recalls another Borgesian model: the "heap of contradictory drafts" that is the talisman of "The Garden of Forking Paths" (Borges 24). This literary assemblage, the fantastic novel from which the story takes its name, appears to violate causality—major characters vanish suddenly, change unaccountably, or reappear after dying. The apparent inconsistencies are intentional, illustrating a radical theory of time: "Unlike Newton and Schopenhauer, [the novelist] did not think of time as absolute and uniform. He believed it an infinite series of times, in a dizzily growing, ever spreading network of diverging, converging and parallel times" (Borges 28).

In much the same way, McDaid's *Glass Man* seems ontologically incoherent. Ty Walker dies in 1981, or 1996, or 2016. He meets his fate

outside of Syracuse, in Brooklyn, on a doomed airliner headed for France. Readers run into all these possibilities as they move from passage to passage, which brings us to the navigation scheme of *Glass Man*.

Once readers have passed from the Switching Yard onto one of the five linear tracks, there are two mechanisms for movement through the text: a button or pair of buttons to the left of the body text[6] and a linked expression at the end of the passage. The buttons are marked with a three-dot sigil, either ∵ or ∴. These symbols are conjunctions from symbolic logic that mean *because* and *therefore*, as hovering glosses on the buttons indicate. In a work that plays fast and loose with causality, these linear operators are inevitably ironic. The operator buttons allow movement either back to the previous passage (*because*) or to the next in the current line (*therefore*), but this arrangement does not imply cause and effect. Setting these buttons aside, the reader can advance to the next destination by clicking an expression that occurs at the end of the body text:

Δt[7]

Like the pseudological buttons on the left, this in-text operator carries a double sense. In physics, delta-t indicates change over time—and indeed, clicking this button does advance the timeline of the current reading, though it may as easily take us back to something we have seen as forward to unread material. Linear references are misleading in this text. There is another way of understanding "change" and "time," if we factor in Borgesian possibilities. In addition to *in*, *over*, or *through*, we might also consider *of*—a change of time, time-streams, or continuities. Both "The Garden of Forking Paths" and *We Knew the Glass Man*

6 The appearance of these buttons is governed by one of the two unlinked passages in the story structure—the lower one that appears blank. It actually contains JavaScript instructions that assign the buttons their symbols and functions.

7 The Δt expression has its most famous literary use in Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49* (1966), where it is associated with end-stage alcoholism (delirium tremens, or the DTs) and a possible visionary experience. McDaid alludes to this dark magic at several points in *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse*. Δt is also the logotype of McDaid's personal brand, Torvex Communications—as might be expected of a science fiction writer with a recurrent interest in time travel.

humanize post-Newtonian time. Borges evokes the tragedy of a descendant who must assassinate the man who tells him about the greatness of his ancestor. McDaid offers a more prosaic tragedy, suspected senile dementia:

> My neurologist, Dr. George Zanniger, is an ass. The kids, convinced that my memory is shot, set me up with an appointment. In unctuous doctor-speak, he spooled out his "As we get older," speech. Reviewed my med list. Made me touch my nose. Stand on one foot. Take the goddamned Montreal Cognitive Assessment. Yes I can count backwards from 100 by sevens. Draw a watch. Recite the Invocation of Mnemosyne: Face Velvet Church Daisy Red.
>
> He wrote me up for a brain MRI, which will almost certainly show absolutely nothing. Modern medicine is the apotheosis of analytic hubris. If I recall counterfactuals, if there are acausal lacunae in my narrative timeline, it is not beta amyloid or TIAs. ("My Neurologist Is an Ass")

And so we arrive at another variation on *whoever he was*: our nameless narrator, beset with plaques or brain bleeds—or a condition best diagnosed in the Twilight Zone. If we follow his insinuation, he is not just "unstuck in time," in Kurt Vonnegut's phrase, but adrift across a series of timelines (Vonnegut).

The narrator of *Glass Man* is haunted by stories, or the sketchbook approximation of stories, or maybe by narrativity itself. Just as plausibly, though, we can trace his problems to bodily jeopardy, the fraught experience of an aging man in an old house. Hauntings often involve houses, and this is especially the case with *Glass Man*—though as Huckleberry Finn might say, you will not fully appreciate the reference unless you have read *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse* by Mr. John McDaid.

The *Funhouse* is an artifactual hypernovel consisting of paper documents, audio tapes, and a set of digital files created with Apple Computer's long-obsolete HyperCard application (see Moulthrop and Grigar). It was published by Eastgate Systems as a multimedia assemblage in 1993 (McDaid, *Uncle Buddy's*). Prefiguring both the surreal architecture

of *House of Leaves* (Danielewski) and the unpeopled spookiness of *Gone Home* (Gaynor), *Funhouse* incorporates a digital memory palace, a hyperlinked image that maps its software components onto regions of an old house. As in *Glass Man*, there are multiple dimensions to this hauntology. The virtual house and its textual contents are conveyed to the reader as the literary estate of a vanished writer, Arthur "Buddy" Newkirk, described as a relative we may not remember because of "lapses of memory or other unspecified divergences" ("READ ME FIRST"). The Newkirk of *Funhouse* is a contemporary of the Syracuse crowd, front man and songwriter for the punk band called the Reptiles. In *Glass Man*, he is an older, semilegendary science fiction writer whom Ty's friends regard with some awe, whose main role involves passing the MacGuffin to Huck. What this revisionist history means for the ficto-biography of John McDaid is perhaps of interest mainly to his fans. Suffice to say that the twenty-first-century Twine work *Glass Man* is haunted by prior art, especially hypertextual experiments from three decades back. In a sense, all Twine works share this haunting, whether they know it or not.

Hypertext linking—the association of words, phrases, and images with code that replaces or transforms the initial text—operates in *Funhouse* through the HyperCard "stacks" that make up its digital archive. Although there are sequential links in most of these stacks, there are also disruptive and digressive links on words, phrases, or images, making the experience of reading *Funhouse* polylinear. In *Glass Man*, hypertext is applied less fancifully, with most passages limited to the linking scheme already described. This limited connectedness points away, perhaps, from the experimentation of the mid-1990s toward older conventions of print fiction.

That shift may be related to the conceptual basis of the work. *Glass Man* was published in an ongoing project of the literary journal *cream city review* called *i0*, showcasing works in which print and digital elements are equally important. A page-bound version of McDaid's story appears in the print edition of the journal. In design and execution, *We Knew the Glass Man* is a hybrid, bridging the domains of book and software, haunted equally by technology and literature.

In this sense, the major ghost of *Glass Man*, Thomas to its Dylan, is the modernist poet Wallace Stevens.[8] McDaid takes as an epigraph the opening of "Asides on the Oboe," a short poem written in 1940 and published in the collection *Parts of a World* (Stevens). For what it's worth, Harold Bloom considers this volume "Stevens' most underrated book" (Bloom 136). The poem is nearly contemporary with Borges's "Garden of Forking Paths," published in 1941, though the texts are related (if at all) only through the idea of a "final," or as Stevens would later say, "supreme fiction":[9]

The prologues are over. It is a question, now
Of final belief. So, say that final belief
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.

That last sentence stands out—maybe perversely so, if we think for a moment like a certain hard-core traditionalist. Stevens is a model of erudition and "quiet authority" on whose work critics like Bloom, J. Hillis Miller, and Helen Vendler have honed their critical insights (Vendler). He is the acknowledged master of difficulty and abstraction. According to Vendler, when a colleague complained of not understanding Stevens's writing, the poet replied, "That doesn't matter; what matters is that I understand it" (Vendler). In other words, Wallace Stevens is not a writer to take literally.

Yet when Stevens's injunction to choose occurs in a work of digital fiction, it has to be taken that way. An important part of the ancestry of Twine and other platforms for branching narrative lies in game books

8 McDaid's overt engagement with Stevens inevitably recalls Jessica Pressman's important thesis about "digital modernism," in which contemporary writers "[adapt] literary modernism as a means for challenging the status quo of electronic literature and our assumptions about it" (Pressman 303). However, Pressman has in mind "works [that] use central aspects of modernism to highlight their literariness, authorize their experiments, and situate electronic literature at the center of a contemporary digital culture that privileges images, navigation, and interactivity over narrative, reading, and textuality." Her primary example is the cine-poem *DAKOTA* by Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, very distinct from the narrative emphasis of hypertext fictions and Twine games.

9 This phrase comes from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," published in *Transport to Summer* (1947).

or choose-your-own-adventure stories, where the “time to choose” comes at the end of every narrative unit, as it does in *Glass Man*. The cultural gulf between Wallace Stevens and game books is about as great as anyone could imagine. There are those who lament that divide and those who have tried to erase it.[10] Notable among these is Aarseth, whose study of procedural narrative is based partly on *The Money Spider*, a game-book from the 1980s (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 69–70). McDaid’s cultural politics align with the levelers, which makes his appropriation of Stevens odd and at least partly ironic. “It is time to choose,” but despite the simplicity of the sentence, its application to McDaid’s story is deeply complicated—and perhaps not so literal after all. In *Glass Man*, both time and choice defy simple understanding.

Ty Walker has six histories and six catastrophes. There is no clear way to differentiate one from another. The deceptively linear structure of the work tilts toward seriality but leaves the reader and narrator in a state of haunting or defective memory. Which time? What time? How do we choose among them? McDaid’s story is fundamentally anxious, yet if we turn to Stevens, we find the opposite, a movement toward final clarity. There is considerably less uncertainty about its central figure:

In the end, however naked, tall, there is still
The impossible possible philosophers’ man,
The man who has had the time to think enough,
The central man, the human globe, responsive
As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass,
Who in a million diamonds sums us up.

“The man who has had the time to think enough” can be applied to McDaid’s story, but with questionable results. Ty Walker has apparently had several worlds and times, and we can wonder if the narrator will ever be able to think enough about this enigma. The “central man” of

10 See the much more nuanced account of contemporary canon formation in Fishelov’s *Dialogues with/and Great Books* (Fishelov).

the Twine story is elusive, more impossible than possible. In the poem, by contrast, the philosophers' man unfolds in a series of symbols: a globe, a mirror, diamonds. The globe is encompassing, the mirror reflective, but the key lies in that cascade of diamonds, shattering light into a constellation of difference. Somehow this explosion of information "sums us up." What can this mean?

McDaid's ghost story complicates such questions, warning that the reference of any "us" becomes unstable across the timelines. Are we the ones who mourned Ty at Coney Island, or came to the funeral in Fayetteville, or watched him slip off the tower outside of Syracuse? Recall Derrida: "No *being-with* the other, no *socius* without this *with* that makes *being-with* in general more enigmatic than ever for us." If we apply this hauntology to the texts in question, we might ask if the first-person plural of 1940 includes a twenty-first-century reader. How was it ever possible to sum up then and now into an "us?" What does it mean to know the Glass Man in the context of a fracturing that is not metaphoric but actual?

Considering this essential question—which is the question with which this chapter began—we come to a major difference between old and new, one with important implications for understanding Twine work in relation to literary tradition. The crux comes at the end of Stevens's poem, after its lament about the disruption of the idyll of "jasmine scent" by "death and war":

It was not as if the jasmine ever returned.
But we and the diamond globe at last were one.
We had always been partly one. It was as we came
To see him, that we were wholly one, as we heard
Him chanting for those buried in their blood,
In the jasmine haunted forests, that we knew
The glass man, without external reference.

To know the Glass Man, for Stevens, is to operate "without external reference." These are his last words on the subject. Knowledge of the impossibly possible central man must be internalized, unworldly,

something outside of image, association, and language. In sharp contrast, McDaid's fiction strains toward externalities, arguably on two levels.

The first reach toward external reference can be found within the story world, in those talismanic stones at the end of each timeline. In their mystic associations, they express a yearning for enlightenment and presence. At a crucial point, we get a unified vision of the stone:

> The stone was unremarkable in that it was veridical. Obstinately truthful. It just was. In the words of my philosophy professor Fernando Molina, who received dharma transmission from Clarence Irving Lewis, it stood, oblivious, beyond any assortment of qualia in my consciousness, a *Ding an sich* forever beyond direct experience. Oh, I could have some epistemically lazy notion that I knew about the stone, but Lewis would have slapped me into clarity: there was no sense in which I could make reliable, testable predictions about future experience. For pragmatic phenomenologists—which is how I had been trained—I was stuck in a bracketed reality, with the stone regarded as real. But any ontic claim was beyond me, denied by the stone's veridical centeredness, its *da stehn* while around it, the rest of the cosmos revolved. ("Nighttime in the Switching Yard")

This centrality is a setup, betrayed to variation. The stone's fixed placement is belied, narratively speaking, by what comes if we follow the links. The centering moment occurs in that deeply nested passage called "Nighttime in the Switching Yard." The cosmos of the fiction revolves or circulates around this point, the main junction from which the death-tracks radiate and to which they return (see figure 13). That pattern reinforces the withdrawal of the thing-in-itself. At the end of each track, the stone is painted with a different mythology, until the reader clicks a locally final Δt and returns to the Yard. Returning reasserts the stone's centrality. There may be "veridical centeredness," but there are also stories, and these accounts create tissues of difference. Every such departure rules out any final "ontic claim," dissolving certainty into a blur of possibilities. Relic becomes tchotchke, Egg Stone devolves to Egg

MacGuffin. After all, *Glass Man* belongs to consumer culture, which is less a matter of object-oriented ontology than a cargo cult.

The reach toward external reference within the story goes to pieces, but there is a second plane of externality in this fiction that also demands attention. The reference, in this case, is the text itself as a technical object. Although this suggestion might seem outlandish for traditional, page-bound literature, it is always appropriate for digital fictions and is explicitly framed here. Naming a key passage "Nighttime in the Switching Yard" calls out the operative metaphor. It reminds us that we are in a system of circulation, variation, and control. As noted, the title points to Zevon's song, a funked-up railroad blues about a midnight train that "runs both ways," much like the recirculating fiction of *Glass Man* (Zevon). The song closes with these words:

Listen to the train
Listen to the track

Taking "listen" in its metaphorical sense of *attending* or *considering*, we might indeed ask how the tracks laid out around "Switching Yard" shape our sense of its curious system of stories and what mechanisms are at work in the Yard.

The first notable thing about the "Switching Yard" passage is its count of hypertext links—six instead of the three that occur in most other passages—and the fact that five of these links are anchored on phrases within the body text, as in familiar hypertext fiction. Each in-line link points to the start of one of the tracks, by which the Switching Yard lives up to its name as a junction point. The sixth link, anchored on the Δt symbol, does something more interesting. Here is its underlying code (written in the Harlowe story format):

```
(set: $rand to (random: 1, $passageList's
length))
(set: $randTarget to ($rand) of $passageList)
<div class="deltat">[[Δt|$randTarget]]</div>
```

The two *set* macros generate a random integer between 1 and the length of a variable called *$passageList*, then use this variable to select an item from *$passageList*. *$passageList* is an array, a special variable whose components can be selected individually. The list itself is defined in the other of those two unlinked passages at the far right of the map in figure 13, the one with the title "startup." It contains the following:

```
(set: $passageList to (array: "Unitarian Church
in Fayetteville","College Was Half A Lifetime
Ago","Glue On The Tracks","Eighteen","One Of
Ty's Songs","Orphic Egg","Met On First Day Of
College","Huck Never Lived On Clarendon","Ty's
Bag Of Tapes","It Was Quick","The Apotheosis
Of Analytic Hubris","Anguinum","Down In
The Basement","Beach At Coney Island","My
Neurologist Is An Ass","Mickey One--
Garbage","Bend Of Convenience","Glain Neidr","A
Jar In Tennessee","How The Bodhidharma Came
to Philadelphia","Remain In Light","Brenda
And Eddie, Or The Grecian Urn","Radio Control
Priest","Egg MacGuffin","Cemetery Of Last
Resort","I'm In Charge Here","Rabbit Test Of
The Apes","Night And Swamp","Mystic Heated
Wine","Aleph","Pret A Enterrer","Covington"))
```

The array *$passageList* includes the names of all passages in the five tracks. The scripting of the Δt link thus reveals a double articulation. A reader of *Glass Man* could proceed methodically through the in-line links in the Switching Yard, entering each of the five timelines successively as they loop down and back, but those attracted to the mysterious Δt will have a different experience. They will drop into the textual system at unpredictable points, often in the middle of an extended meditation, able to grasp what is going on only after returning to the Switching Yard several times. They may thus see the system as doubly disrupted, both by its unstable narrative contents and by the possibility

of arbitrary leaps into randomness. Listening to the track—reading what its script ordains—suggests less a railroad than a pinball machine, a tool for indeterminacy.

What can we do with this understanding of the digital text as an "external reference" for McDaid's Man of Glass? For one, we can conclude that all the drifts and divergences of Ty Walker's history ultimately fall within an intentional system, one that ties understanding to circulation, repetition, and contradictory memories. For another, we can recognize the importance of *contingency*, the activation of outcomes not expected or foreseen, to the meaning of this work. Embracing contingency identifies *Glass Man* as a special kind of sign system, one that has been defined as "a semibounded and socially legitimate domain of contrived contingency that generates interpretable outcomes" (Malaby).

This definition was not written for literary texts, and yet *Glass Man* satisfies its terms. Realist fictions are inherently "semibounded," being invented accounts of plausibly real experiences—an effect accentuated by the contradictory fictions of *Glass Man*. There is certainly a claim to social legitimacy, however ironized, in the invocation of Stevens. How the work delivers "contrived contingency" should be clear. On the last point, "interpretable outcomes" are what *Glass Man* relentlessly reproduces through its rippling self-disruptions. These terms that *Glass Man* fits so well were proposed by the anthropologist Thomas Malaby as a contribution to the theory of play. Here is his complete sentence: "A game is a semibounded and socially legitimate domain of contrived contingency that generates interpretable outcomes" (Malaby 96).

The striking correspondence between McDaid's Twine fiction and Malaby's definition of *game* raises an ultimate question about its "external reference." What if we can know the Glass Man only through play? What if we say, in our networked, algorithmic moment, that final belief must be in a *game*?

Malaby's definition is designed to break down the "exceptionalism" that separates play from other human experiences (Malaby 96). Stricter theories of games would fail *Glass Man* on several points: it lacks evaluative feedback, differentiated outcomes, and, above all, causal logic (Juul 29). Yet with a certain suspension of disbelief, we might find in

McDaid's Twine story elements of active engagement. If, following the Borgesian logic, we are dealing not with a disordered narrative but with limits of conventional/Newtonian time, then we can understand the repeated link signature Δt as a matter of practice—time for change; change the time. "There is a Hand to turn the time," as Pynchon says just before the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* (Pynchon 760), though in the case of *Glass Man*, the act is more click than crank, and the agency is not mystical but human. In this gamelike, second-person context, the Hand belongs to you. You find the time to choose; your engagement turns over the time-streams.

However, even by the most generous standard, McDaid's fiction counts as a minimal game, at the limit of formal requirements, like the "minimum labyrinth" imagined in "The Garden of Forking Paths" (Borges 25). Its print-digital hybridity registers a link to conventional poetry and fiction, the Dylan Thomas side of the old Philippic. To the extent that it flirts with choice-of-adventure fiction, the overture is at least partly ironic. Yet the external reference of *We Knew the Glass Man* does make an important statement with respect to Twine and literature. It points toward writings more fully identified with games—for if final belief must still be in a fiction, the nature of that fiction is in play.

Δt, everybody.

With Those We Love Still Alive

Although it was published five years before *We Knew the Glass Man*, Porpentine's *With Those We Love Alive* seems in many ways the younger work: produced by a writer under thirty, untroubled by specific poetic hauntings, and, above all, written in a way that weaves the intersecting lines of fiction and game into an inviting moiré (Porpentine, *With Those*). *With Those We Love Alive* takes us to a dark-fantasy city ruled by a nightmarish, insectoid empress who lives on human sacrifice. Despite its frequent horrors—warning for "abuse" is given at the outset—the game has the immersive potential of a darkly lucid dream, complemented by Brenda Neotenomie's entrancing soundtrack. Play

begins with a striking promise: "Please remember: nothing you can do is wrong" ("please").

This statement overturns a major convention of computer game design, in which wrong options usually far outnumber those that are in some way right (see Juul, *Art*). In contrast, Porpentine offers blanket indemnity as we begin "living this life." McDaid's temporally unstable ghost story implicitly asks *whoever he was*, but that is not the only existential question we can find in Twine works. For stories that converge with games, the foundational questions include *Who will you be at the end of play? Who are you this time?*

Character configuration is a mainstay of games, from tabletop role-playing systems to console epics and massively multiplayer online universes (see, e.g., Voorhees). *With Those We Love Alive* has its own way with this convention, offering the player/reader at the outset three queries: birth month, "element," and eye color. These factors seem arbitrary, very different from those in other games (races, tribes, professions, moral axes). The arbitrariness of the options continues the iconoclasm of the opening message. Although *With Those We Love Alive* is not a print-digital hybrid like *Glass Man*, it takes up a similarly liminal position between story and game, though on its own terms.

The birth month question is resolved by choosing from a table of links. For the other two factors, Porpentine uses an implementation of cycling text: clicking a word or phrase replaces it with the next item in a list, the last option looping back to the first.[11] A conventional, transitional link ("Yes") locks in the current selection and advances to the next passage. This naming sequence tells us something important about Porpentine's craft. Electronic text replaces itself, but nothing says the replacement has to be simple or instantaneous. Links may trigger scripted instructions as well as direct transitions. Though passage-to-passage transitions are common enough in *With Those We Love Alive*, the naming sequence reminds us that Porpentine has other options.

---

11 We have encountered cycling links in the practical chapters and will come to them again, but we should point out that this feature in Chapbook is notably streamlined in comparison to the older constructions Porpentine uses.

After the third query, we come to a link that will reveal our name. If we choose to be born in the first month, taking petal as our element and brown as eye color, we are called "Sparna Jarndot." Dialing in the seventh month, tears, and green eyes names us "Cade Ophigloss." Twelfth, fur, and gray yield "Langloss Umdas." Every configuration of Porpentine's three variables produces a unique name. There are twelve possibilities for month, six for element, and ten for eye color (including "Heterochromic" and "Nothing here describes my eyes"). Multiplying 12 times 6 times 10 gives us 720 possible names. To a nonprogrammer, this number might suggest a maximalist or brute-force approach, a series of 720 if/then conditions. Porpentine actually uses a more efficient scheme, but the impression of large scope is correct—*With Those We Love Alive* is notably bigger than *Glass Man*, as is clear from its structure map:

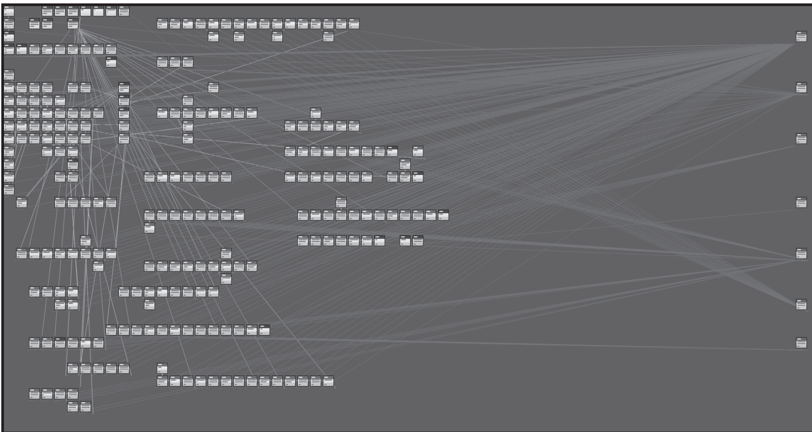

Figure 14: Structure map of *With Those We Love Alive*

There are 267 passages here, compared with 38 for *Glass Man*. References to print works have limited usefulness for Twine, but the difference between short story and novella gives a rough measure. The map comparison can also be deceptive, however. Though there is a dense tissue of linkage among the passages, there are also many more passages without link lines than in McDaid's structure. Passages of this kind often contain code, as we saw in *Glass Man*'s Switching Yard,

and can also be invoked as in-line elements in dynamically assembled passages. Both strategies are used here. *With Those We Love Alive* is both broad and deep, making intensive use of scripting.

A short digression is needed at this point. In just a few years as a Twine creator, Porpentine has produced an extraordinary range of work. *With Those We Love Alive* is among her more formal, literary efforts. Chapter T-4 looks at works that are more spontaneous, personal, and in-the-moment. Perhaps inclining toward this side of her aesthetic, Porpentine has called her process "trash spinning" (Kaye; see further discussion in chapter T-4), but that term is hard to square with *With Those We Love Alive*. The way Porpentine transforms storytelling in this work seems anything but discardable. There may be a lot of "spinning" going on here, but the machinery behind it is impressive.

Noah Wardrip-Fruin, another pioneering maker and theorist of digital writing, has written about an "ELIZA effect," in which computer programs appear larger and more complicated than they actually are (Wardrip-Fruin, *Expressive* 23). The term refers to a script used in an early experiment in interactive text generation, undertaken in the mid-1960s by the computer scientist Joseph Weizenbaum. ELIZA mimicked the speech strategies of a Rogerian therapist so successfully that users of the program, interacting via teletype, behaved as if talking to a human doctor (Wardrip-Fruin, *Expressive* 32). Despite this striking functionality, the code for ELIZA is remarkably simple. It exemplifies a programming concept called *elegance*, in which compact expressions yield versatile results.

Porpentine's naming system is notably elegant. Looking at the code embedded in the "Name" passage reveals a chain of *if* conditionals, but only 30, not 720. The script uses the month selection to choose one of twelve first names (everyone born in the first month is a "Sparna"), the "element" factor to set the first syllable of the surname, eye color the second. A few lines of code produce a large range of variations.

Games produce "interpretable outcomes," in Malaby's phrase, and gamelike stories do the same. They can be understood as subjects of interpretation, or texts. In the case of the naming ritual, the reader may

wonder about larger determinative effects. Will Sparna Jarndot have the same options in the game as Caromine Melovir or Mia Hexador? Do names matter, and if so, how?[12]

Reading a story/game hybrid requires a different procedure than reading a print/hypertext hybrid such as *Glass Man*. In *Cybertext*, Aarseth distinguishes between *scripton*, a sign presented to a reader or player for interpretation, and *texton*, the arrangement of systematic signs whose activation produces readerly experience (Aarseth, *Cybertext* 62). The multiparagraph, page-like passages of McDaid's story foreground the scriptonic, aligned with traditional close reading. In contrast, Porpentine's passages tend, at least on first presentation, to be terse and mainly descriptive, a common feature of some textual games. Here, for instance, is the initial description of the empress's city.

> The streets are narrow, winding, mazelike. Ropes span between buildings like enormous spiderwebs blanketing the city.
>
> The temple is this way, across the dry canal.
>
> The dream distillery is surrounded by scaffolding.
>
> Return to the palace. ("City")

Like McDaid's Switching Yard, passages like "City" and "Palace" are routing points, meant to be encountered many times during the game. The metaphorical narrative train runs both ways, out to other parts of the story and back. However, the trips we take in this text are subject to more complex manipulation. In *Glass Man*, the Switching Yard remains constant in expression and function. In Aarseth's formalism, the work has "static dynamics" (Eskelinen 45). In *With Those We Love Alive*, however, the switchyards can and do change during play, both in visible text and invisible logic. This is what Aarseth calls "intratextonic"

12 The syllables of the surname are written directly to the screen and are thus purely local, but the given name is recorded in a variable, so it could be used in other passages (which it is) and affect deeper logics of the game (though it doesn't). Salter points out the resemblance of this logic to that used in meme generators, image-based name generators, and other recent code crazes.

dynamics, indicating a program that can be flexibly configured. We can understand this by looking at the code for "City":

```
The streets are narrow, winding, [[mazelike]].
[[Ropes]] span between buildings like enormous
spiderwebs blanketing the city. <<if $dead_
person is "city">>A dead person is watching you
from a window.<<endif>>

The [[temple]] is this way, <<if $day gte
21>>across the [[flooded]] canal.<<else>>across
the [[dry]] canal.<<endif>><<if $day gte 14 and
$day lte 17>> [[Black petals]] cover the temple
steps.<<endif>>

<<if $day lt 7>>The dream distillery is
surrounded by [[scaffolding]].<<else>>The
[[dream distillery]] has a gruesome pull for
you.<<endif>>

[[Return to the palace|Palace]]
```

There are ordinary links here, as in McDaid's Yard, but also several items enclosed not in the double square brackets of standard hypertext, but in two pairs of angle brackets: << >>. These are in-line TwineScript statements, two *if* conditions and an *if/else*. They refer to values stored in the variables *$dead_person* and *$day*. If the value in the first variable is "City," the narration includes that ominous, undead watcher. The other conditions test for values in *$day* and adjust the description of the scene accordingly ("gte" and "lte" mean greater-than- and less-than-or-equal, respectively). The greatest value of *$day* mentioned here is 21, implying that *With Those We Love Alive* spans at least three weeks of in-game time, although other scripts could extend that range. Notably, the conditional block includes links that will not otherwise be seen. If we have been through at least seven

game-days, for instance, the scaffolding comes off the Dream Distillery and a link to the corresponding passage asserts a "gruesome pull." This switching yard never sleeps; it remains in operation around the clock, constantly reconfiguring expressions and affordances as we conduct our in-game life.

If we want to understand the literary dimensions of Porpentine's work, we need to appreciate the way her code entwines—pun very much intended—with the words that evoke its world. We cannot rely solely on scriptonic readings, looking only at what appears at any given moment of the game. This level of language overlooks mechanisms of generation and control not presented to the reader. These mechanisms make a difference to reading because they make or generate differences in the text presented. Any momentary configuration exists in relation to other possible expressions.

With Those We Love Alive goes quite far in exploring the possibilities of Twine's first-generation release.[13] The work includes third-party JavaScript extensions that add a routine for cycling text, visual effects, and an audio handler for the soundtrack. Making these miscellaneous resources work seamlessly within one's own design takes considerable effort. In this case, we might say that Twine work at its best is as much like producing as it is like songwriting—art forms that have notably converged in the last half century.

Reading code requires us to account for linkage and dependency as well as local effects. We can see how *$dead_person* and *$day* work in the "City" passage, but in what other structures are they implicated? Both variables are introduced (declared) in a special passage called "StoryInit," whose instructions are performed when the game begins. This placement means they are accessible and alterable from any passage in the work. The variables are eventually reset by code attached to a passage called "sleep_process," activated when the player-character returns to her room and decides to sleep. Here is its script:

13 *With Those We Love Alive* was written using some version of the first release of Twine, probably in the 1.4 series.

```
<<set $weather = random(1,7)>>

<<set $tasted = false>>

<<if $day neq 1>><<set $dead_person = either("ga
rden","workshop","city","lake","balcony","temple
")>><<endif>>

<<if $hormone_day is 7>><<set $hormone_need =
true>><<set $hormone_day = 0>><<endif>>

<<set $day += 1>><<set $hormone_day += 1>><<set
$energy = 1>>
```

Using the *either* macro to make a random selection from a given list, the *$dead_person* variable distributes possible encounters over six locations in the story, repositioning the ominous figure while we rest. The crucial variable *$day* is incremented. We also see five variables not previously discovered: *$weather*, *$tasted*, *$energy*, and the related pair *$hormone_day* and *$hormone_need*. The first randomly assigns weather conditions. The second records whether the player has sampled the liquor of stolen dreams in the Dream Distillery. The *$energy* variable determines the player's ability to perform tasks in her workshop. As we can see, the game applies both historical and budgetary constraints, which brings us to *$day* and the two *$hormone* variables, which need more detailed discussion.

As the name indicates, *$day* keeps time for the game, incremented whenever we return to our chambers and click a link commanding the player-character to sleep. Sleeping is pivotal in *With Those We Love Alive*, in terms of diegesis, gameplay, and the game's overall concept. When the sleep link is clicked, the screen fades momentarily to black. A story transition may occur during sleep if *$day* or some other variable reaches a crucial value. If no transition occurs, we fade back to "Chambers." This curious process is the equivalent of McDaid's Δt, the command with which we turn the time, but time here has a distinctive character. The

visual effect and the possibility of repetition make the sleep action more organic than discrete. In terms of story, the sleep mechanism ties time to our in-game body. Ludically, it connects progress to elective player action.[14]

The two *$hormone* variables relate to a major feature of our in-game life: we play as a person in transition, dependent on "estroglyphs" to maintain hormonal balance. As we will see, this is only one aspect of Porpentine's complex treatment of embodiment, about which there is much more to say both here and in chapter T-4. For the moment, we should note that cycles of our fictional body belong to a systematic representation of self and other, a cybernetic *world model*. The game creator and theorist Michael Mateas refers to "playable models" (Wardrip-Fruin, *How Pac-Man Eats*). Likewise, Montfort identifies world-modeling as a primary constituent of the form (Montfort). More recently, we have come to think about such models in and out of games in terms of algorithms, those often-unseen mathematical abstractions that govern digitally connected life.

Computer games are perhaps uniquely suited to comment on this aspect of modernity, especially when they operate satirically. One particularly strong example in this line is Valve Software's *Portal*, a geometrical puzzle game oddly cross-bred with an in-house parody of *Half-Life* (Swift). Bo Ruberg uses *Portal* as the basis for a remarkable "too-close reading" of the game's queer gender dynamics, to which we will return (Ruberg 56–83). Reading without the lens of queer theory, Michael Burden and Sean Gouglas extol the game's "algorithmic experience" in ways that resonate with *With Those We Love Alive*. As they see it, *Portal* presents

> the tension between the cold, hard certainty of algorithms and the creativity and freedom of an art. It is the tension between the algorithm's simplification of complex concepts versus the need for problematization and criticism. It is the tension between a world without questions

14 This rest-to-advance pattern is also used in *Howling Dogs*, where it is explained more directly to the player.

> and the inquiry that art embodies. It is the tension between knowledge that emerges from the algorithms of the scientific method and the human knowledge encountered in art. All videogames are algorithms, and therefore, *Portal* is an algorithmic exploration of human struggle against algorithmic processes. The game's very nature is an adherence to rules. Art's very nature is to challenge rules, to the point of defying definition. (Burden and Gouglas)

In this view, *Portal* counts as art because it establishes a world-model and concomitant story—the player-character's struggle against a homicidal AI—that satirically pits the algorithmic regularity of game software against the antinormative impulses of art. As Burden and Gouglas see it, *Portal* bends the nature of the computer game back upon itself, yielding important insights into the human experience of technology.

Setting aside obvious differences of platform and context, we can find parallels between Burden and Gouglas's definitive art game and *With Those We Love Alive*. Both are intensely algorithmic, intricately tied to logical constraints and performance measures. Both are haunted by dangerous maternal presences. Though the mute empress of Porpentine's game shows none of the chatty ex-humanity of Valve's GLaDOS, their homicidal regimes are similar. Artistically speaking, both texts display edgy relationships to their primary genres. Valve satirizes the paranoid fantasy of *Half-Life* through the cartoonish antics of Aperture Labs. Porpentine gives us a game in which "nothing you can do is wrong," challenging mainstream game design. It might follow, then, that *With Those We Love Alive* also constitutes a work of algorithmic art, pitting machinic procedure against human striving and desire. Since the primary medium of this work is written language, we might make a strong case for integrating *With Those We Love Alive* with at least some version of literary history, one that unifies story and game.

Two eminent critics of writing and technology, N. Katherine Hayles and Alan Liu, have independently proposed replacing the old name *literature* with more expansive terms—"the literary" (Hayles 4–5) or, as Liu has it, "the future literary" (Liu 8). Perhaps *With Those We Love*

Alive offers a harbinger and model of this future, but to fully understand its prophetic potential, we need to examine more fully its curious moral precept: *nothing you can do is wrong*.

We have earlier called this claim iconoclastic. It can also be simply baffling even to the strongest reader. In an important early review of *With Those We Love Alive*, Emily Short begins with a classical reference. She quotes a quatrain from the *Bhagavad Gita* in which Porpentine seems to have found her title:

> *Better to live on beggar's bread*
> *with those we love alive,*
> *than taste their blood in rich feasts spread,*
> *and guiltily survive*

The lines suggest a convenient moral axis for the game, a call to renounce worldly pleasures in favor of ascetic discipline. But *With Those We Love Alive* is not that kind of game. As its unseen structures suggest, it does require a kind of discipline, the regular round of rest and glyph application. Likewise, any careful gameplay could be interpreted as a renunciation of bad paths to reach the good, but this game/story eludes such reductive conclusions. This is not in any way a game of withholding or avoidance. We are "living this life," and in it, we face certain choices. One such decision point particularly bothers Short:

> The player has a choice: to be a person, one with others, or to be separate and alone. This choice is presented in isolation, before we understand how it will constrain us. In what follows, we discover its importance. If we choose to be one with others, we are then forced to participate in the eradication of the princess-spores, going around stomping the new-formed creatures to death. We can show them mercy only if we have determined to separate ourselves from the rest of humanity. I did not like stomping them to death, and I did not like declaring myself separate from all other people, and I also feared letting them live to perhaps become new Empresses (but the world building here is so allusive that it is hard to know for sure what will

> happen if they survive). The entire passage disturbed me regardless of which way I played it. (Short)

Cognitive dissonance may be baked into algorithmic art, where human-centered impulses collide with logical procedures. We can separate ourselves from the monster-aligned human community, or we can join the massacre of the empress's "mewling" daughter-spores, which is like treading to death several litters of kittens. The moral axes in this game are darkly drawn and complicated. We are often forced to choose without a full grasp of the consequences.

Short is understandably displeased. "After this sequence," she notes, "we are invited to draw an icon representing what we feel about this turn of events. My icon was a ball of spikes" (Short 2014). This inscription is one of many that players of *With Those We Love Alive* are invited to draw on their bodies over the course of the story. Short reflects on the procedure:

> This was a strange and striking mechanic. It is arguably inconvenient, in that it restricts the contexts in which you can play this (probably not at work, or on the bus, or right before a job interview) and it asks the player to do something rather intimate in response to the game. It incorporates a sensual experience, the touch of pen on skin, and it asks the person drawing to think about how they would inscribe certain ideas. And where to inscribe them: I not only found myself thinking about how I would draw a symbol representing, say, "chasm," but also where on myself I would put that symbol in order to carry the most weight. Our bodies are geographical; there are places on the skin that mean "vulnerable" and parts that mean "strong" and parts that mean "receptive, empathetic"; places that are scarred or calloused. (Short)

The "intimacy" Short finds in this body-drawing has been elsewhere suggested as a general aesthetic of Twine works. Laura Hudson quotes the designer and critic Cara Ellison in praise of "mechanics of intimacy" that stand in sharp contrast to the kinetic and objectifying mechanics of commercial game design (Hudson MM46). Porpentine's

invitation to engage the "geographic" body offers a clear instance of this approach.

Short is pragmatically skeptical about body-drawing—*you can't play this at the office*—but we may want to set aside this objection. Perhaps this transgressive story/game is not meant to be safe for work. When she asks players to ink their flesh, Porpentine calls for a radical commitment of *presence*. Drawing on our bodies asks us to be present both to our personal geographies, as Short insightfully observes, and to the fiction/game/mechanism in a way that is outlandish and perhaps excessive, even if the ink washes off. Porpentine's glyph-play reorients and reasserts the human with respect to the textual machine.

To grasp the full significance of this aesthetic move, we need to return to the critical discussion of *Portal*, but with an update and spoiler warning. We need to consider the last word of the *Portal* saga (so far), the end of *Portal 2* (Weier). Ruberg revealingly notes that "*Portal* is a game about a woman moving inside another woman," exploring lesbian and domme/sub themes in the relationship of GLaDOS and Chell (Ruberg 80). If we factor in the second game, we can see the entire trajectory of this weird/queer pairing (see Moulthrop). In the ultimate scene of the second game, Chell is offered a truce by a restored GLaDOS. She is free to "go make some new disaster," in the words of the closing-credits song (Weier, *Portal 2*), but she will have to do this somewhere other than Aperture Laboratories. Before this moment, we have learned that the human seed of GLaDOS's personality was Chell's mother, an innocent abducted into the system. We watch GLaDOS purge the last traces of this maternal presence from her cores, leaving us with a flicker of suspense—will the now thoroughly inhuman AI kill us off at last? Instead, GLaDOS sings a moving operatic aria ("Cara mia addio") and sets Chell free—but not before declaring that she will replace human test subjects with robots from now on.

In the last frames before the credits, Chell walks through not a transdimensional portal but an ordinary door that slams behind her. Ruberg reads Chell's exit from the first game as an expulsion from the monstrous/maternal body, but it is tempting to take the final act of the second game more literally (Ruberg 77–79). The door reopens

to eject the lost, beloved Companion Cube from the first game, then shuts again forever. Chell turns away, and the last thing we see through her eyes is an endless, post-Anthropocene prairie. The impression is less of birth or release than separation and exile. Jonathan Coulton's closing song this time is "Want You Gone," a breakup ballad. As in the first game, the credits roll over a company document. In *Portal*, it was a gleeful performance evaluation. In the second game, the form reads, "NOTICE OF TERMINATION." Chell is given her life back but she is dismissed from employment. The murder-science machine doesn't need human beings anymore.

At first, there may seem little in common between this moment in *Portal 2* and Porpentine's inky mechanic of intimacy. Perhaps we could say that each disruptively winds computer games around a different medium and genre. *Portal 2* replaces gameplay with cinema or machinima—something we will see again in chapter T-5; *With Those We Love Alive* moves from the procedurality of story-game to the free space of embodied writing. These lines of flight do not apparently converge—and that is precisely the point. The *Portal* saga's collision of algorithm and human desire ends in separation. There may be a ghost in the final version of its machine, but its lone human subject is cast into the wilderness. *With Those We Love Alive*, in sharp contrast, keeps humanity in the picture, reasserting embodiment in the face of the machine. Porpentine extends the reach of her imagination to our bodies—and remembering that promise that we can do no wrong, to bodies that are implicitly beloved.

In the song that ends the first *Portal*, GLaDOS dedicates the "triumph" of her test regime for "the people who are still alive," a phrase that unwinds into several threads of meaning. In one sense, it refers to Chell, who has managed to avoid all the murderous traps; more metaphorically, it also includes the player who has cleared the final level in a nondead state; most directly, it applies to GLaDOS herself, denying defeat to set up the sequel.

As Ruberg notes, *alive* is the keyword of Valve's epic (Ruberg 81). Of course, it also has pride of place in Porpentine's title. Perhaps we can use the slippery logic applied to this term in Valve's game to unwrap the

enigma of Porpentine's opening promise. In playing the story-as-game, we may well do things that prove to be wrong: such is the algorithmic experience. The world-machine is morally broken, and we are constrained by its flawed conception—but never absolutely. Porpentine creates a fictional enclosure that is semibounded, a permeable membrane. Her game does not exclude our humanity but promotes our presence as embodied selves. The poet Stevens in his day aspired to a knowledge "without external reference." In another century, in the vastly different techno-social context of her generation, Porpentine comes to the opposite conclusion. By being present to her text, we become the beloved who are still alive, and in this corporeal presence, offering our bodies as scriptable surfaces, nothing we can do is wrong. As Ruberg would put it, games awaken and serve our desire for alternative solutions, for a range of experiences not bound by traditional norms (Ruberg 11). As embodied in *With Those We Love Alive*, perhaps this achievement defines "the future literary" or a literary future, at least if we believe that writing-as-art remains a human enterprise—so long, we might say, as we have skin in the game. So long as that remains the case, maybe nothing we can do with our imaginations, as poets or as game-makers, can ever be wrong.

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