

CHAPTER T-4

Queer Twine and Camp

Twine is inarguably situated in queer discourse: some of the most influential designers and games produced with Twine are narratives that center trans identity, dysphoria, coming out, and coming of age as queer. Play with pronouns, bodies, monstrosity, and eroticism is common, particularly in the works of leading designers such as Porpentine, Anna Anthropy, Christine Love, and many more. There are two ways we might talk about Twine as queer. The first is straightforward and thus overly simplistic: Twine is a platform made rich by queer stories. If we were to define a Twine canon, it would be impossible to do so without including rich narratives of trans bodies in sci-fi horrors, of lesbian cowgirls finding romance, of queers in love at the end of the world—can we imagine making such a claim about any other game platform? This distinction alone is enough to place Twine works firmly on the margins of how gaming is generally discussed, even in scholarly circles, where an increased interest in queer gaming has permeated. What is subtext elsewhere is firmly text in Twine—while it is possible to construct depictions of unnuanced, heteronormative relationships, the platform itself seems to challenge such depictions and asks authors to reconsider binary choices for richness of exploration. And this aspect, perhaps, leads us to a less straightforward reading of Twine as queer.

Given its origins in open-source, its insistence on a nostalgic interface that recalls early hypertext even as it dismisses such antecedents, and its extreme potential for an over-the-top aesthetic that recalls the days of GeoCities, is Twine itself a queer platform?

The early web was delightfully queer: a walk down memory lane through a 1999 feature in the *sexualities* category suggests that “the gay, lesbian, bi, transgendered and other anti-gender communities were ahead of the game here,” noting the existence of a 540-page “tome the size and shape of a computer manual” by Jeff Dawson in 1998 entitled *Gay and Lesbian Online: Your Indispensable Guide to Cruising the Queer Web* (Gauntlett 327). It is hard to imagine such a guide today—indeed, it is hard to recall the type of mind-set that would have a writer typing out websites such as the lengthy URL to For Queer Mice, a website appropriately housed in the WestHollywood neighborhood of GeoCities (Gauntlett 328).

Twine is a throwback to this aesthetic, drawing on what artists Olia Liana and Dragan Espenschied define as a type of digital folklore language in their unusual and important volume documenting the types of web art practices that often go derided or unremarked: “Users’ endeavors, like glittering star backgrounds, photos of cute kittens and rainbow gradients, are mostly derided as kitsch or in the most extreme cases, postulated as the end of culture itself. In fact this evolving vernacular, created by users for users, is the most important, beautiful and misunderstood language of new media” (Espenschied and Lialina). The examples these artists draw on emphasize the feminine and the decorative, two intertwined aesthetics that already attract derision.

In the introduction to their mix of theoretical and pragmatic examinations of this user-powered web, Liana and Espenschied further note that the attention to the history of dominant technologies means “we have studied the history of hypertext, but not the history of Metallica fan web rings or web rings in general,” a reminder that is particularly compelling given whose web is centered by this divide (Espenschied and Lialina).

Notably, popular coverage of these same artists’ project to delve into the GeoCities archives and share their findings on Tumblr has come with

headlines like “Remember the Hilarious Horror of Geocities” (Chan). This derision dismisses the investment of individuals working in the web in a tradition not so removed from outsider or visionary art, which is defined by the American Visionary Art Museum as “Art produced by self-taught individuals, usually without formal training, whose works arise from an innate personal vision that revels foremost in the creative act itself” (“American Visionary Art Museum”). The personal web page embodies shaping webrings, building coordinated background sets and buttons to avoid HTML defaults, crafting animated GIFs, and optimizing resolution to account for limited modem bandwidth.

These individuals were the original artists-in-residence of the web. Artist Richard Vijgen draws our attention to the spatial metaphors of GeoCities through his project Deleted City, which he described in an interview as capturing the settler mind-set that GeoCities encouraged: “The idea that in the beginning, cyberspace is an empty space that has to be populated, was I think easily linked to this idea of America being an ‘empty’ continent. . . . They provided web space with a story, with a narrative” (Howard). Notably, the most popular of the communities was Heartland, which suggests a GeoCities with a highly normative main street: “With an emphasis on ‘parenting, pets, and home town values,’ the Heartland neighborhoods (including 41 suburbs with names like Plains, Meadows, Prairie, and Woods) also spoke to Geocities’ immense popularity with a specific demographic: wealthy, white, and American, those with the disposable income to become some of the net’s first users” (Howard).

Step outside of “Main Street,” however, and the neighborhoods change dramatically: WestHollywood offered the forthright listing: “Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered” (GeoCities, “GeoCities—Neighborhoods”). Notably, this same neighborhood was at the center of an early case of online censorship when CyberPatrol blocked the entire community rather than reviewing its content: “The blocking of West Hollywood raises the issue of whether it is possible to filter the Internet at all” (Wallace, “There Goes the Neighborhood”). The pages linked in one archived WestHollywood neighborhood hub tell a different story, to list just a few:

Lesbian Epiphanies

GENDER is so confusing. ??

The Wonderful Homepage of Two Huge Indigo Girls Fans

(GeoCities, "Geocities WestHollywood LGBTQ")

Such pages are arguably as much a part of the history of hypertext as any novel associated with the history of electronic literature, yet most of this work goes undocumented outside of the work of a few web historians, and the aesthetic expression of early queer hypertext (and the communities it enabled) is typically treated separately from the literary potential, despite the many impromptu literary journals and narrative-driven spaces within these neighborhoods (see figure 15), particularly on the fandom side. Such pages often included personal touches along with vivid color and images. These pages, taken collectively, demonstrate a number of early solutions to personalizing what was once more appropriately called the home page: boring line rules were replaced with GIFs, including the examples here of a rainbow bar or a spider moving across the page. Visitor counters tracked one's impressions, often accompanied by guest books for leaving comments. Under-construction GIFs of every variety reminded the viewer to return to

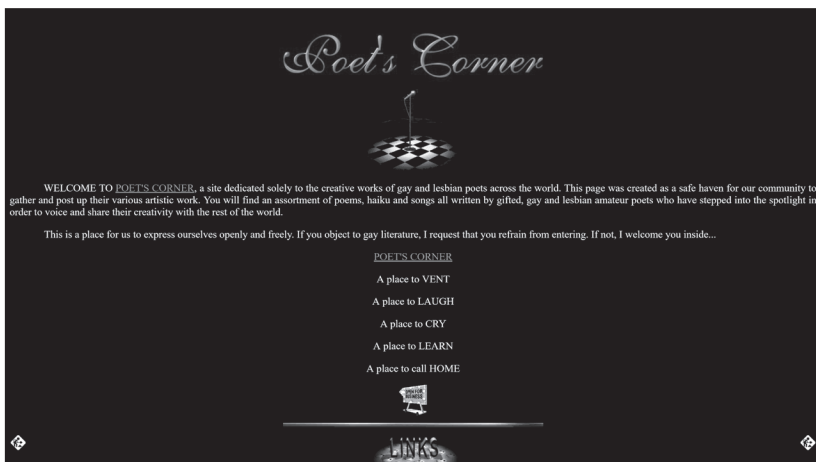


Figure 15: An example of a literary home page in WestHollywood, emulated from 1996 (Twilite909)

By contrast, web-based hypertext is more inherently multimediated, and authors experimenting with the web as a platform frequently exercised their greater aesthetic control. For example, Jackson's *My Body* (1997) integrated image maps, although many of the other aesthetic choices of these works were functional. For example, *My Body* incorporates small image fragments illustrating each page of the body as the reader navigates the work, then uses the standard practice of highlighting active and visited links in different colors to demonstrate what the reader has already explored. The work uses some of the affordances of hypertext, such as image backgrounds, to create the tiled repetition of the brushstrokes.

As a medium grounded not in text but in hypertext, with the markup that entails, and adopted not necessarily by makers of "literature" but by makers driven by games and interactive media, broadly conceived, Twine is a platform where aesthetic restraint is not so dominant. Indeed, one of Twine's defining characteristics is the ability to harness layered, multimedia expressions of emotion rapidly, and remixing is particularly easy for live works drawing on everything from YouTube videos for backgrounds and music to a digital art heritage of animated GIFs, vector graphics, blinking text, and more. Twine thus offers a technological throwback that recalls the age of GeoCities and an interface that points back to HyperCard. The use of HTML tags and in-line style hearkens back to when the web was filled with animated GIFs and personalizing a page with everything from animated GIFs to elaborate fantastical backgrounds and blinking line-break bars was simply the norm. The modern web has its own aesthetic: Facebook does not give users leeway to change a color, much less a font.

This expressive space allows Twine artists to work in an aesthetic uncommon to games: camp. Mark Booth homes in on the challenge of defining camp: "The key to defining camp lies in reconciling its essential marginality with its evident ubiquity, in acknowledging its diversity while still making sense of it" (Booth 66). Susan Sontag suggests that camp is frequently intertwined with the decorative, "emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content," explaining that "the hallmark of Camp is the spirit of extravagance" (Sontag 59). Jack Babuscio notes

that Sontag obscures the queerness of camp, which is essential to the camp of hypertext and Twine: “Camp is . . . in part, a reaction to the anonymity, boredom, and socialising tendencies of the technological society. Camp aims to transform the ordinary into something more spectacular. In terms of style, it signifies performance rather than existence” (Babuscio 122).

Twine has been positioned as an outsider platform, a connection Matt Kirschenbaum suggested in his survey of the field in 2017: Twine seems aligned with punk and disruptive, in spaces ranging from academic to industry. The saga of *Depression Quest* (perhaps the most influential Twine game in history) is a testament to the power of Twine to anger. Feminist and queer code studies invite us to ask if there is something about Twine that is responsible for this potential—does the platform’s emphasis on accessible disruption make it inherently queer or feminist? Making such a claim is significantly risky and potentially painfully reductive. David Halperin warns against a normalization that pulls queer back into an abstraction: “A generic badge of subversiveness, a more trendy version of ‘liberal’” (Halperin 341). Certainly, Twine’s subversiveness is well documented. A case can be made that Twine’s ease of use and distribution is the key to this subversion, and Leonardo Flores sets Twine forth as part of the third generation of literature, with an emphasis on accessibility: “The software tools at their disposal are varied and increasingly lower the barrier to entry, with programs like Twine, Unity, Javascript Libraries, simple and free publication platforms (like Cheap Bots, Done Quick! and Philome.la), and social media apps like Vine, Instagram, Snapchat, GIPHY, and others” (Flores). Such tools notably include many free corporate platforms appropriated for the purpose of personal creativity.

Alongside these other tools of the third generation, Twine evokes what Kathi Berens refers to as the “Try it Yourself” model of e-literary intention: “As the technical barrier-to-entry lowers, a wider range of people are empowered to ‘try it yourself’ making digital art. They ‘reject or are unaware of’ e-lit’s aesthetic of difficulty. ‘Try it Yourself’ doesn’t prescribe an aesthetic. It discloses an intention” (Berens). Porpentine invokes a similar intention in an interview entitled “Beautiful Weapons,” where she notes both Twine’s accessibility and the role of

herself and other queer designers in making it popular. Porpentine describes Twine in the interview in terms of conflict:

Twine is guerrilla warfare. It is cheaply-made pipe bombs and land mines that can proliferate and crop up in the dominant space. Besides being easy to create, it is not enough that our art be beautiful. It must be a beautiful weapon. We must ensure that our art is weaponized and can destroy other things.

We can flood sites and the Web with our games because it's so easy to upload and share. There's just no obstacle to playing them—you just load it like a webpage. We're competing now with AAA games. That's what I mean by weaponization. It's hard to argue with that kind of viral, proliferating, breeding spirit. (Kaye)

This discussion of Twine's accessibility allowing for the ease of proliferation is notably part of the essential appeal of modern hypertext and is what distinguishes web-driven hypertext from the platforms associated with electronic literature. Platforms such as StorySpace forefronted the literary (as discussed in chapter T-3): this is not to say that such platforms can't be similarly accessible for creation, but their models of distribution are more tightly controlled, and the obstacles to their proliferation and play are intensely different. Twine offers no obstacles—a concept can be built, circulated, and played without specialized knowledge, which lends itself to expressive works that can be rapidly experienced and responsive to immediate discourse.

In this, Twine is an heir to Flash but without the baggage of a browser extension. While Flash certainly brought an era of weird casual games and experimental electronic literature with it, the corporate control of the platform and the need for an installed extension always limited its scope and eventually its life-span (Salter and Murray). Flash emerged because hypertext was seen as insufficient to the task of play and marketing—Twine is a rebuttal and a reminder of how much native web technologies can accomplish.

The open-source aspect of Twine is particularly resonant with its use for queer and disruptive play, which Adobe's ownership of Flash (and

the cost of development software) inherently hindered by tying it to corporate economic models that similarly make the iOS and Android app stores less queer-friendly spaces. Twine's queer potential has previously been described primarily in terms of this type of democratization: Alison Harvey notes that the queer alternatives Twine provides for game-making are emerging in part due to its lack of alignment with "games" as a construct: "Because Twine was not conceptualized as a technology of game-making, assumptions about what these kinds of tools do are not embedded in its structure and paratexts in the same way as other dedicated digital game design programs" (Harvey 97). This returns us to our opening discussion of Twine's formalism: the mechanics most associated with dominant game genres—violence, acquisition, and conquest—are absent from the platform's affordances. They are possible but not embedded or default.

With that said, it is impossible to separate the history of queer Twine from the history of queer gaming, particularly given the number of Twine works examined here that make explicit interventions in gaming discourse. Similarly, it is not in the realm of electronic literature where most Twine works seek to make their intervention but instead in the broader context of the web and games. Matt Kirschenbaum's jest of Twine as punk occurred before its counterpart, an apparent number-one hit of electronic literature born of Twine: the special episode of the Netflix series *Black Mirror* called "Bandersnatch," discussed in chapter T-1. The mundane focus of "Bandersnatch" on a cis, straight white man as a lone-wolf game designer is the epitome of traditional games discourse and does not seem to easily mesh with a discussion of Twine's punk potential. Instead, it emphasizes exactly the qualities that many Twine creators react against. Yet this is not an inherent refutation of Twine's potential as a disruptive force—rather, it is a reminder that the goals of the creators and particularly the role queer designers have played in shaping Twine's aesthetics and its impact cannot be separated from our discussion of Twine's potential for influence.

The queer creators who have shaped Twine have claimed a different aesthetic place for the platform. Thus I argue that Twine is not punk; it is camp. It is the potential of the web, and its history, for decorative

and dramatic play; it is the invitation to excess and personal style; it is frequently too much and does not collapse under the weight of style. Its emphasis on in-line tags allows users to jump from blinking text to rumbling to marquees and everything in between in the space of a single passage. This is not to say that all work in Twine is camp (it isn't) or that Twine is uniquely a queer game platform (it's not, nor is it the only home of queer gaming.) However, its fundamental embrace of the aesthetics of an early, defiantly personal web makes Twine an invitation to explore style and decoration, and the resistant narratives queer Twine creators have produced have embraced camp as a form of defiance against the painfully traditional masculinity associated with gaming.

Camp and Porpentine

No work better demonstrates Twine's potential for glorious excess and camp than Porpentine's *Cry\$tal Warrior Ke\$ha* (2013), a tribute to the named pop artist whose anthem "Warrior" plays in the background when the game is launched. One reviewer describes that album as demonstrating "Ke\$ha's willingness to experiment with everything, up to and including hitherto unexplored corners of the kitchen sink. There's *Animal's* scuzzy synthpop, classic rock, EDM and, on occasion, dubstep. In 'Crazy Kids' we get all the above with bonus cut-and-paste points, completely changing between genres like a light switch" (Nellis). The music blasts the moment you open the browser to Porpentine's *Cry\$tal Warrior Ke\$ha*. Hover the mouse over a link, and the bold turquoise lettering is replaced by larger, bright-pink letters with a tiled, animated GIF of a pink star flashing repeatedly behind the words. The story (set at a concert from the artist's perspective) quickly moves into the absurd and fantastical as an attack interrupts the performance and Ke\$ha's internal monologue responds:

your elite bodyguards/back-up dancers are undone.

it wasn't just an energy attack. whoever did this had chrono magic.

the time bomb didn't kill them. it scattered them to distant lonely worlds of time, temporal backwaters. they could be the kid you meet on the street, the old woman hobbling through her garden. (Porpentine, *Cry\$tal Warrior Ke\$ha*)

Porpentine frequently introduces the supernatural elements of her narratives with similar matter-of-fact introductions. However, in this iteration, they are also evocative of the imagery of Ke\$ha's album and concerts, both infamous for theatricality and excess that the game captures through rhythmic, spaced lines in a bold color palette (see figure 17).

The game was announced on Porpentine's Tumblr in 2013 with the message, "THIS GAME IS 100% CANON." The original post received 287 notes (mostly hearts and reblogs) with comments including "The greatest game so far in 2013" and "Play this now" (Porpentine, "PORPENTINE"). The release location of Tumblr is particularly significant given Tumblr's role as a hub for queer culture and particularly transgender, genderqueer, and gender-nonconforming community building during this time (Fink and Miller). The community building and role of queer trans aesthetics in shaping Tumblr follows a trend of shifting from platform to platform as corporate policies make some spaces

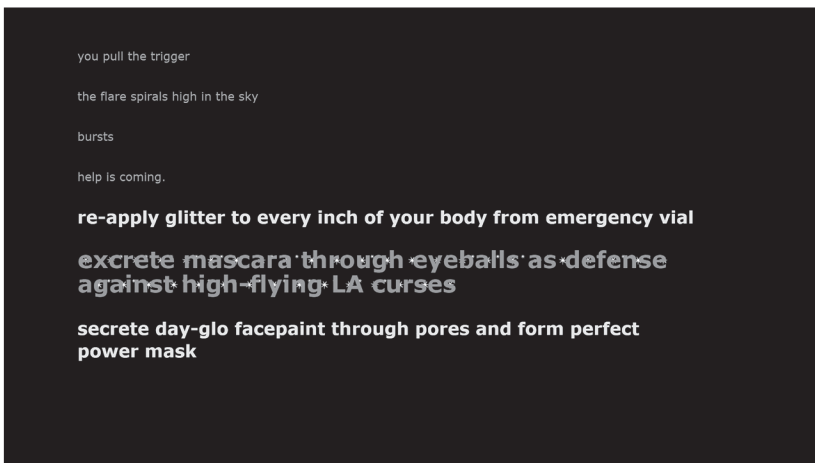


Figure 17: A pivotal moment of conflict in *Cry\$tal Warrior Ke\$ha* (Porpentine)

uninhabitable for queer discourse: the people reshape the platform, and through their influence, “the website becomes a laboratory for erotic experimentation, a canvas for the collective depiction of trans desires, and a living archive of sexual attraction” (Fink and Miller). This reimagining of space recalls Kara Keeling’s framework of queer as resistance in software: “Queer offers a way of making perceptible presently uncommon senses in the interest of producing a/new commons and/or of proliferating the senses of a commons already in the making” (Keeling).

While the experience of *Cry\$tal Warrior Ke\$ha* is short (about fifteen minutes or less), it is memorable. Notably, this game made Amanda Wallace’s Storycade list of three recommended games to introduce people to Twine. Wallace’s description of the game highlights the message about popular culture and particularly its resistance to the antifan, noting that just as the protagonist “fights off crowds of haters,” so too can the game be used “to point out when someone is going too far with their pop-culture hatred” (Wallace, “3 Twine Games”).

This emphasis on fighting back against haters, and particularly those who would limit her artistic expression, is not just a theme of Ke\$ha’s music but also a pivotal part of her career. One poignant review notes that the game thus has ongoing, and changing, resonance thanks to the singer herself:

The year is 2013, and this is long before Dr. Luke and the rape allegations became common knowledge, back when Kesha was simply a pop princess crossed with a glitter encrusted party girl. Back when she sang about brushing her teeth with a bottle of Jack, back when she sang to the misfits and the bad kids. Back when she wasn’t held in contractual limbo, unable really to sing at all.

Because the character in Porpentine’s game isn’t the Kesha of 2016. She’s the 2013 Ke\$ha, who was still suffering in silence. Who was the symbol for at least one developer, of being capable of facing down the haters and surviving. Of smiling while doing it. (Hudgins)

This postassociation is particularly powerful given the similar narratives of abuse and silencing of women that would play out in the

games industry, changing the game's significance and keeping it in the minds of many players. Porpentine's more literary games, from the darkness of *Howling Dogs* (2012) to the bleak meditation on suicide in *Everything You Swallow Will One Day Come Up Like a Stone* (2014) and the psychologically haunting body horror *With Those We Love Alive* (2014), attract the bulk of her critical enthusiasm and praise. *Cry\$tal Warrior Ke\$ha* is something else: a game that demands the player be immersed in a world of pop music and feminist glitter just to play, a game that's lyrical components defy the nonfan to even comprehend. Yet it deserves as canonical a place as Porpentine's other works, in part thanks to its crucial role in cementing an essential part of Twine's aesthetic potential—excess. Mat Jones goes even further in his review of the game: "It's not very long and it'll change your entire life. You'll view everything from this moment on as taking place post-CRY\$TAL WARRIOR KE\$HA world and ensure that any Game Of The Year list you produce from now until after the universe consumes itself maintains a special place for it in any Top Ten. All of time freezes in place and yet existence carries on, morosely, as we've already reached the apex of human achievement—perhaps that of any living being known or unknown. We've limited reason to carry on" (Jones).

It is impossible to talk about the game without positioning this excess in relationship to the hypermasculinity of the games industry—notably, the game appears on Zoë Quinn's "Top 10 Games of 2013," released on Giant Bomb just as the attacks on her would bubble up. They describe the game as "best played outloud in a group of friends so that you can collectively feel like badasses as you shout out MANTIS VICTORY SCREAM together" (Quinn). As a Gamergate snapshot, this captures the significance of the game in indie discourse—unsurprisingly, the comment thread devolved rapidly, with one moderator asking that people cease from posting attacks with the note "Also, I don't see any mention of feminism in Zoe's list, so I'll be treating any mention of it as off-topic, irrelevant, and distracting from a conversation that should be happening about the games" (Quinn). While the height of harassment would not start until August 2014, the toxicity was already well seeded.

Another succinct review captures the game's essence and puts it firmly in conflict with AAA game development expectations: "I finally played *Cry\$tal Warrior Ke\$ha*. CWK is the Saints Row 3 of twine games, but it's better because it's not full of a bunch of generic side missions masquerading under the guise of absurdist premises. Instead CWK is part a fuck you empowerment statement and part the greatest Magical Girl video game I've ever played. It not only made me appreciate Ke\$ha, but it made me appreciate myself" (M).

The empowerment seeded in *Cry\$tal Warrior Ke\$ha* is not simply narrative or text—it is a defiance that runs through the game's entire over-the-top design. The game is bold and attention-demanding, the soundtrack designed to blast and impossible to ignore or silence without removing much of the contextual meaning. The color choices are bold and tacky; the imagery straight from Ke\$ha's album covers; and the continual moments of animation and flashiness are certainly worthy of a "magical" girl. Some of the characteristic elements of camp twine emerge from an examination of *Cry\$tal Warrior Ke\$ha* and its legacy: an emphasis on the decorative and the excessive; an unapologetically queer thrust to both narrative and design; and an embrace of multimedia that can feel discordant or cacophonous.

Porpentine's work also embraces camp in process and discourse. In an interview, Porpentine discusses her approach to hypertext and making with Twine as "trash-spinning," emphasizing spontaneity and emergence of meaning through the act of creation:

I've always just called it trash-spinning. Just like rolling up trash. But most of my games are just spontaneous improvisations where I roll up everything in my environment and I wad them together. They're a big, crystalized trashy ball of everything that's happened to me over the 24 hours or 48 hours in which I made the game. Like conversations, or you'll notice how I incorporate all of the music I'm listening to in my games. It's just very organic. Then I try to turn it into a weapon, something people can feel. How can my emotions be transmitted to another human being? A dart of nausea, arousal, triumph, crying, even radical, transformative joy. (Kaye)

This description of “radical, transformative joy” is, we would argue, at the heart of what Twine brings to the web—the very traits that Porpentine describes as allowing for “trash-spinning.” Porpentine’s approach has inspired others, particularly thanks to her role in amplifying the platform through Tumblr and other queer, indie, and experimental communities online. Her work is definitive of Twine’s camp potential, but it is also in conversation with a number of other creators who perform similar radical, transformative acts with their work.

Much of the radical work of Porpentine is less grounded in recognizable popular culture and moves into more speculative, and surreal, territory. Porpentine’s compilation of Twine’s works, “Eczema Angel Orifice,” includes a number of contemplations on bodies. Unlike *dys4ia* (Anna Anthropy’s original “empathy” game), Porpentine’s work centers the physical and emotional experience through metaphor. Porpentine described her embrace of the inhuman in an interview: “A lot of my games have been kind of submerged. . . . They’re written from a very dissociated perspective where the point of view is almost smeared into the environment. They have trouble conceiving of themselves as a person” (Muncy).

Porpentine’s *Girlwaste* draws on the aesthetic of the retro web, zines, and low-res art and particularly embodies this reckoning with the physical body through a submerged, inhuman self. The color palette is initially reminiscent of the stark red, lined landscapes of Nintendo’s Virtual Boy, while the “movement” recalls the earliest graphical RPGs, offering the player arrows to navigate on the search for estrogen (see figure 18). The lines of the body moving are emotionally charged, and the transparency works to craft a sense of incompleteness and disconnection. The player encounters others who help her out on the quest, such as a “slimebabe” who “is not from this layer.” The monstrous bodies accompany your personal need: selecting “ache” raises the text “Your glands rumble. Icicles of withdrawal pierce through the reverberation.”

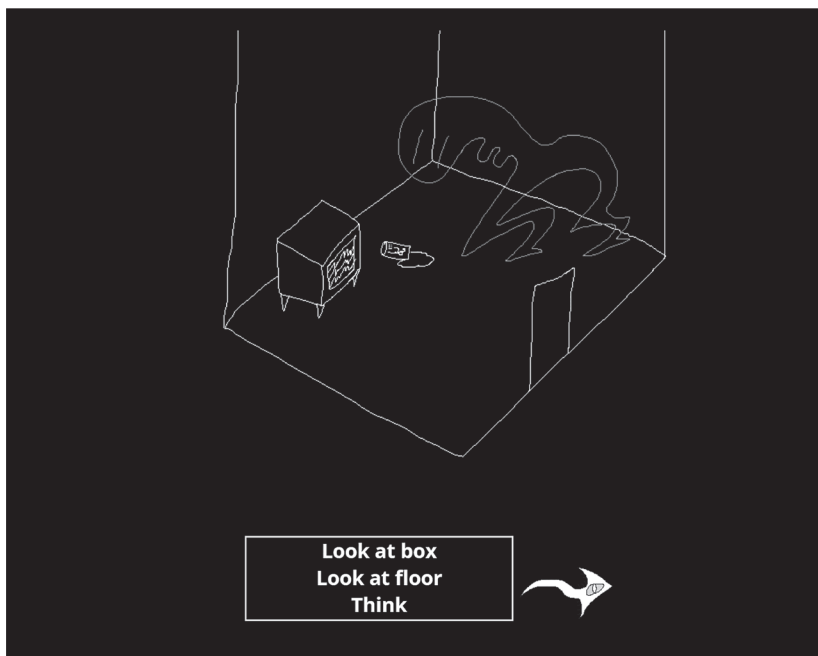


Figure 18: Representative graphics from Porpentine’s *Girlwaste*

Queer, Camp Twine in the Wild

Another significant example, Christine Love’s *Even Cowgirls Bleed* was released on Tumblr around the same time as *Ke\$ha* (2013 being the height of Twine camp, perhaps?)—she posted with an important warning: “I was not feeling great that day” (Love). In an interview, she elaborated on the origin points: “The whole thing is based off something that happened to me with a girl in real life. It left me feeling pretty shitty, and . . . well, here’s the thing about crying yourself to sleep: it seems like it’d work eventually, but mostly it just gives you insomnia. . . . So after the second or maybe third night of that, I decided I was sick of crying and decided to funnel those feelings into something productive” (Johnson).

The emphasis on sorrow rather than joy places a catharsis at the heart of the game that leads in a far darker direction than the bright colors immediately suggest. The game chronicles a lesbian romance between two cowgirls amid conflict, featuring an interface that removes

all the black and white usually associated with Twine in favor of shades of orange and red. One reviewer describes how Christine Love breaks the expected Twine interface to draw the player in:

During the passages where nothing much is happening, the “Holster” button alternates between either side of the screen, mimicking the in-game description of you anxiously tossing your pistol from hand to hand. And when the game starts to take a dark turn, you try to carefully thread your crosshairs between the ominous targets to what seems like a safe one, only for the text layout to force the exact misfire you were trying to avoid. Even if the player is not, in fact, a lesbian city slicker with dreams of becoming a cowgirl, the identification reinforced by the synchronicity between the text and the player’s actions is enough to put you into that mindset, however briefly (Maragos).

This use of the crosshairs is particularly jarring in a narrative that includes significant eroticism and dialogue, two things not associated with game genres that typically ask players to look at the world through the lens of a gun. The game forces the player to be conscious of violence, and the potential for violence, throughout and asks the player to “holster” as a metaphor for inaction. Christine Love is particularly well known for her more visual works, such as *Digital: A Love Story* (2010) and *Ladykiller in a Bind* (2016), both built with Ren’Py, a more complex Python-driven game-making tool influenced by Japanese anime aesthetics and aimed at the development of visual novels. It is thus not surprising that she brings some of these aesthetics to her twine works, including *Magical Maiden Madison* (2013), a story that unfolds surrounding sexual tensions following a magical girl’s battle with a tentacle monster (Love).

Another exemplar of camp twine with an explicit political emphasis is D. Squinkifer’s *Quing’s Quest VII: The Death of Videogames* (2014). Released as part of RuinJam, an event responding to the attacks on Zoë Quinn and the broader abuses of Gamergate, the game features an animated galactic background; bold, pink, and green text; and hover effects with animated links (refer back to figure 10). The game’s text

is similarly filled with references and commentary—the player finds themselves on a ship entitled the *Social Justice Warrior*, in reference to the derisive label given to feminist and queer influencers perceived as pushing for representation in games and other media at the cost of “quality” or “authenticity” (defined, of course, as fidelity to canons centered on the stories of straight, cis, white men). The character reflects on the “misogynerd” claiming of gamer identity at the expense of those already present, making games: “Gamers.’ That’s what the misogynerds started calling themselves, once they invaded your planet. To make it worse, they act as if this is the way it’s always been, as if Videogames was a planet that they alone discovered, as if your people hadn’t been there first” (Squinkifer).

Ruberg responds to the queer experience of D. Squinkifer’s *Quing’s Quest* as encapsulating both content and aesthetics, noting that “the text shimmers and sparkles; upbeat lounge music plays in the background. . . . The game’s message is ultimately one that mixes sadness and anger with hope” (Ruberg 219). Deeply embedded in classic hypertext and games, the aesthetics are both familiar and striking, but one reviewer describes the game’s fundamental appeal as a power fantasy, bringing a twist to the video game mechanics the work resists: “In a game where your choices don’t matter at all, it was strange to find myself feeling empowered at the completion. . . . I was left wanting to fist-pump and dance, full of renewed energy to fight the misogynerds I encounter everyday in my web space” (Reynolds). Notably, the type of power explored in all these examples is framed in terms of resistance—in particular, placing the bold, anti-haters battle royal of *Cry\$tal Warrior Ke\$ha* alongside the dance battles and face-offs with “misogynerd” in *Quing’s Quest* offers a commentary on the dull predictability of combat in most game systems.

Other exemplars of queer twine have less connection to camp aesthetic and instead push at the representational narratives of games. For example, Anna Anthropy’s *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (to which we will return in chapter T-5) is a powerful example of a game that focuses on the moments leading up to an ending and thus recalls Shira Chess’s work on the queer narrative potential of games that can “play in the middle spaces” rather than relying on the moment of climax

(Chess). Aesthetically, *Queers in Love at the End of the World* does not match the other Twine games discussed here—the palette is minimally altered from one of Twine’s defaults, and the user’s attention is drawn to the rapidly passing countdown of the ten seconds promised until the world ends. The ending of the game is always abrupt, and there’s no way to get a sense of completion, only desperation. However, the game challenges expectations in another way: it takes the expected pace of hypertext and breaks it, pushing the user to frantic physicality as expressed through the few verbs available and the need for rapid action that is ultimately meaningless.

Anna Anthropy’s *Twine and Punishment* collects some of her Twine games and is decidedly immersed in queer, camp aesthetics, including the sardonic work *The Hunt for the Gay Planet* and the prelude work *Keep Dreaming, Space Cowgirl* (Anthropy). *The Hunt for the Gay Planet* is particularly significant as a commentary on games culture, as the work engages with the lack of queer representation in massively multiplayer universes.

Sav Ferguson’s *That Boy Is a Monstr* takes a fantastical spin on Grindr and makes more significant use of the aesthetic expressiveness of Twine for its mock-app interface, offering the player messages from characters with usernames from “AngryBear” to “xWereSelkiex.” However, the messages the player encounters are quickly revealed to be darker. Sam’s reflections shared with the player throughout the game are immediate and poignant, emphasizing a personal voice: “With a glance, he’d see band posters, polaroid’s with friends, those little triangle things—bunting? rainbow and glittery, and fairy lights. Maybe if he got up and looked at the polaroid’s, he’d see me with my old girlfriend. Or me pre-T. Or, what if he looks at the band posters too close and realises I just printed them myself? Is he gonna think I’m a hipster? God I hope not. AM I a hipster?” (Ferguson).

Aesthetically, the game includes pointers to its narrative—the trans flag colors inform the gradient background, visible even before the player is brought into the details of the character’s struggle with rejection and discrimination from the other users of Monstr. The metaphor of monstrous bodies explored in Porpentine’s work is made more literal

and humorous through the character identities here. The game also employs a list of references as part of the credits, including an article serving as a point of inspiration: “More Americans claim to have seen a ghost than a trans person” (Williams).

The 2018 game *Pirate Queen* by twinegamesareboring is described on its itch.io page as “gay as hell” and lacks many of the aesthetics of the other examples profiled here but demonstrates some of the key opportunities for representation (twinegamesareboring, “Pirate Queen”). Another work by the same author, “Didn’t,” similarly offers representative play: “And remember when you were fourteen-years-old, and her hair was chlorine-bleached and her lips were blackberry-stained, and she kept asking is-there-something-in-my-teeth, and you wanted to kiss her, but you didn’t?” (twinegamesareboring, “Didn’t”). Such works are part of an ecosystem of personal, usually individually crafted games tagged as queer or LGBTQ on itch.io, a platform whose economics are primarily grounded in donations and a “pay what you can” system.

The visibility of *Cry\$tal Warrior Ke\$ha* and the other games discussed here in game publications reviews is part of its larger discursive impact and puts it alongside other queer, camp Twine games that use the medium to push back against all the dominant structures and assumptions that go with the word *game*. Importantly, the queer Twine games emphasized here were all originally released for free (although occasionally released later as part of paid collections) and thus are also not part of the traditional economics of game production. As Harvey points out, “Queerness acts as a destabilizing force, challenging norms of who gets to be a producer and what should be made, but it is wrought with the dangers and precarity of this position. Operating beyond hegemonic spheres of production and reproduction entails a number of real risks, and we should be careful not to equate emancipatory promise with poorly paid, insecure work and life below, on, or near the poverty line, dependent on the vicissitudes of crowdfunding” (Harvey 104). The larger discourse of games labor (and the binaries and hegemonies of the games industry) is being resisted through Twine but is far from dismantled.

The traditional economics of the game market leave little room for experimentation or diversity in representation, as Matt Conn points

out in his discussion of the importance of GaymerX and queer gaming communities: “In the transition to 3D, as costs for game development skyrocketed in front of a hungry market, risks hit an all-time low and the nearly comically omnipresent white, straight, cisgendered, able-bodied, thin, classically handsome main character became a staple. Although there’s nothing wrong with making a game about this guy, doing so over and over is akin to an entire fleet of artists all painting the same man” (Conn). Conn’s words evoke the embodied avatars of nearly every shooter, the graphically enhanced but otherwise relatively unchanging bodies we’ve inhabited awkwardly as players through the decades.

Notably, that same transition to 3-D is often blamed for the death of other narrative game genres that Twine resembles—just as those genres have survived through alternative market modalities, so too has hypertext continued divorced from any models of clear profitability (Salter). The reconciliation of queer gaming and the current AAA labor market seems insurmountable. While queer narratives are making headways in film in indie productions (with notable recent standouts such as *Booksmart*, *Moonlight*, and *Call Me By Your Name* all receiving critical acclaim for coming-of-age stories of the type common to Twine as well), queer-centric videogames are still relatively absent. Indie successes such as *Life Is Strange*, *Gone Home*, and *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator* (discussed in detail in *Playing the Outsider*, forthcoming from Bloomsbury) are outliers, receiving more critical acclaim than financial success and inspiring few commercial imitators.

Similarly, conferences such as Queerness and Games have been central to increasing the awareness and visibility of queer gamers, designers, critics, and scholars in games discourse (Pozo, Ruberg, and Goetz), while queer game studies is still even more marginal than feminist game studies in the field. Discussions of queer representation in electronic literature are even more unusual and not strongly embedded in the theoretical or aesthetic models of the field. At the same time, the designers of queer games resist some of the discourse of scholarship and criticism that can take a reductive approach. In 2015, Anna Anthropy exhibited a new piece entitled *Empathy Game* to comment

on the trend of amplifying games by queer and marginalized creators as a way of “understanding.” The game featured a pair of boots with a pedometer, with one mile of walking equating to a single point in the game. As Anna Anthropy described, “You can get a high score on that game . . . but you’re probably not going to beat mine. You can spend hours stomping around in those boots and it will only bring you a fraction closer to knowing what it’s like to be me, to be trans” (D’Anastasio). Anthropy’s own work on indie game design (and particularly the need for inclusive, accessible, game design communities and tools outside of conventional commercial platforms) predicted a rise in personal game development that brought with it what Bo Ruberg called the “queer games avant-garde” (Ruberg 6).

However, that queer games avant-garde must be understood through the lens of attack and with an awareness of risk. In June 2019, at NarraScope, D. Squinkifer gave a talk entitled “How Making Videogames Turned Me into a Depressed Gay Communist” in which they addressed the making of videogames pre- and post-Gamergate through an interactive, choice-driven performance piece. The piece was augmented with a knock-off Google Glass that highlighted the uneasy relationship with technology that living in a “cyberpunk dystopia” evokes. They addressed Gamergate directly through the choice to talk about 2014, noting the lessons the hatred directed at designers left: “When you’re part of any number of marginalized groups, fame is an occupational hazard. . . . Before, I used to believe in the fiction that there was no such thing as bad publicity. That it was important to be bold and brave and controversial. . . . But when the controversy isn’t over your art or your ideas, but over your right to exist as a human being . . . What can I even say? It’s terrifying.”

D. Squinkifer acknowledged a complicated relationship with the concept of empathy, and indeed with the role of the personal in game-making, noting that many players had complained about the choice D. Squinkifer made to use the second person (a common interactive fiction trope) in their work: “When you write in the second person, and you bring in your own very specific experiences, people start to complain . . . you shouldn’t have used you, you should have used I. So

you continue to write in the second person, knowing this, being more deliberate in creating these disorienting feelings.”

D. Squinkifer noted that inviting players into their experience is part of the goal of their work, even while resisting the idea that this type of understanding could be easily reached or that empathy for the marginalized was more than a “commodity” to players and the industry: “I’d also be lying if I said that getting people to understand me doesn’t factor into why I make games. I make games based on my own lived experiences, in hopes that other people will relate to that experience in some way.”

While Zoë Quinn has written about the impact of Gamergate on their life, and a few others have spoken publicly, even the act of speaking invites further silencing. The cycles of the alt-right that now occupy the attention of internet researchers both in the academy and on technical platforms are inescapable. As D. Squinkifer put it in their talk, the idea that “you will never be accepted, and this world has no place for you” is amplified. D. Squinkifer’s performance is a reminder of the consequences of visibility—that exposure, the currency of the web, was fundamentally weaponized in Gamergate, and the awareness of that weaponization cannot be reverted. The consequences of Gamergate on game development (and its participants) are still not known and perhaps cannot be apprehended. Gamergate is not over. Indeed, as of 2019, Zoë Quinn left Twitter briefly following extensive harassment after recounting an experience of sexual harassment by a game designer who later lost his life to depression (Penny). As one critic powerfully recounted of the harassment without end, “Some days it feels like the whole world is being held hostage to male fragility. Sometimes it seems that there’s no limit on what women, girls, and queer people are expected to tolerate in order to protect men from a moment’s uncomfortable self-reflection. Sometimes I don’t know who to trust anymore” (Penny).

In the face of this toxicity, the queer, camp Twine that persists is defiant in its very existence.

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