

TOWARD A WORKING THEORY OF QUEER HYPERMEDIA: AN ANALYSIS
OF QUEER TEXTUAL STRUCTURES IN *GONE HOME* AND *WHAT REMAINS
OF EDITH FINCH*

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ABSTRACT

TOWARD A WORKING THEORY OF QUEER HYPERMEDIA: AN ANALYSIS OF QUEER TEXTUAL STRUCTURES IN *GONE HOME* AND *WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH*

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In this project, I analyze two video games, *Gone Home* (Fullbright Company 2013) and *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow 2017), through a queer theoretical framework, focusing on three specific features of the games: 1) their status as open world games, 2) the agency given to players in interactions with objects, and 3) how ambiguous player-character identity is used to create a sense of estrangement in the player. I use these features to argue for a specifically queer theoretical approach to hypermedia, which is attentive to the process of how players create an identity for themselves within the game world. I also introduce the concept of the *reader-player*, a term that I believe (more accurately than *reader* or *player* alone) represents the cognitive/embodied approach that reader-players bring to hypermedia texts.

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INTRODUCTION

This is a project about what comes next. To read the pre-colon portion of this paper's title and be confronted with the notion of a "theory of queer hypermedia" may at first be jarring. The term *queer*--within academia and without--is polysemous, laced with various meanings that connote values both contemporary and arcane. *Queer* is what is strange, ineffable, transgressive to society. In her model of queer reading and writing strategies, Hanna Kubowitz grapples with a definition of *queer* that runs counter to the signification of queerness-as-other that runs through even the most academic iterations of the word:

The trouble, though, with words typically used to define queerness is that they themselves are more often than not negatively connoted. "Strangeness" and "oddity," as well as "deviance" from the norm are points in case, which is why even openly queer-affirmative theorists are scarcely able to provide positive definitions of queer. Therefore, to highlight the affirmatory stance in my use of the term I might just as well add: Queer is cool. *Queer is beautiful*. (202, emphasis added)

I came to queer theory before hypermedia. Initially, as an undergraduate obsessed with formalism and Platonic ideals, critical frameworks seemed arbitrary and imposed, convenient rather than interpretive, prescriptive rather than dynamic. The idea of embracing queerness, of sitting with and interrogating the open spaces in literature, of intentionally reading *into* those spaces to mine them for meaning, repelled me. Over time,

however, as I grew more comfortable with critical theories beyond formalism, and significantly with my own identity as a queer person, I began to see the value inherent in a theory that asks its users to bring analysis into an embodied realm. The seemingly elegant dichotomy of mind and body vanishes in the messy, discordant spaces of identity (textual and otherwise). That space is “real,” whether it is, as I hope to show, conjured in physical reality or the virtual world.

The idea for this project emerged initially out of an attempt to better understand hyperfiction and hypermedia, which, following Roland Barthes, are defined as narratives in which relatively short individual pieces of text, called “lexias,” are connected through some form of linkage to other relatively short individual pieces of text. I thought, at the time, that I would write a grand piece of hypertext, something that would engage the critical theories with which I was becoming so familiar. Too quickly, however, I realized that I had, in haste, leapt over what would be the most vital component of my project: namely, understanding *how hypermedia functions* in the first place. I turned to the closest text I had on hand about hypertext, Michael Bernstein’s *Getting Started with Hypertext Narrative*, which I had picked up during my attempt to write a Very Large Hypertext. I wanted to understand the connection between critical theory and hypertext. “Serious reading has always encompassed rereading,” Bernstein says in the first chapter of *Getting Started*. “Hypertext requires rereading, and makes manifest the way changes in the reader change the work” (8). This, for me, was my first inkling that hypertext could become queer.

The further I looked at research into hypermedia, the more interested I became in the idea held by some feminist scholars that hypertext could represent an expression of Hélène Cixous' *écriture féminine*. Where intersections of digital writing and critical theory are concerned, the discussion appears largely dominated by feminist scholars. These conversations I found to be concerned primarily with the ability of hypermedia to operate outside of linear narratives¹ and to take up issues of feeling and memory in a way that other literature may, or perhaps *can*, not. One of my favorite quotes from this period of research is from Carolyn Guyer, describing one of her works of hyperfiction: "It is hardly about anything itself, being more like the gossip, family discussions, letters, passing fancies and daydreams that we tell ourselves every day in order to make sense of things... They are...the quotidian stream" (Guyer qtd. in Landow 207). This project examines works of (hyper)fiction that deal intimately with intimacy, with family and home, the quotidian stream.

In the process of researching, I discovered a niche. With all of the attention payed to hypermedia by feminist scholars, I was surprised to find that it was significantly less attended to by scholars of queer theory. After more study and thought, I believe that the root of this oversight may be in the descriptive language that surrounds these fields. Just as queer theory evolved from feminist theories, borrowing the focus on the sexed and gendered body while opening up the discourse to new ways of thinking about these

¹ Incidentally, much theorizing of hypermedia emphasizes the non-linearity of narrative when, in fact, much hypermedia is manifestly linear. Many feminist hypermedia scholars acknowledge this (see: Landow chapter 6, "Reconfiguring Narrative").

bodies, so too did *hypertext* become *hypermedia*, a form which is textual, but not exclusively so, in the same sense that queer theory encompasses so much more than gender and sexuality. I realized, from this connection, that hypermedia studies which included and emphasized video game texts would be the area to direct my focus.

I have chosen my two texts, *Gone Home* and *What Remains of Edith Finch*, based on the fact that they both still operate in forms that are recognizable as hypertext (even though they are primarily audiovisual texts), giving their reader-players *lexias* to interact with which build through a symbolic system of meaning into a narrative which will necessarily differ depending on the player. I am interested in what queer theory has to offer analyses of these texts, and have determined thus far that it seems to be particularly useful for examinations of how identity is formed in interactions between the reader-player and the player-character, as well as (following the ideas explored in Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*) how relationships are formed between the reader-player and the objects (*lexias*) they encounter. Queer theory as a discourse aims to operate outside of notions of binary limitation, so I have directed my attention toward games that do not constrain players in binary or linear ways, but which encourage an active participation in explorations of identity and meaning. In the first sections of this paper, I will provide an overview of the lines of thinking I will be engaging in my analysis, which textual structures are most salient to queer theory analysis, and why such analysis matters at all.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Hypertext was first proposed as an idea by Vannevar Bush in a 1945 article titled “As We May Think,” which he wrote in response to a perceived need for a system that would make documents more accessible and shareable for researchers. This hypothetical system was called “memex,” an editable microfiche which would allow for, as Emily Berk and Joseph Devlin explain in their timeline of hypertext history, “fast access to information, ability to annotate, and the ability to link and to store a trail of links” (13). Although the official predecessors of hypertext would not appear until the 1960s, most famously with Ted Nelson’s proposed Xanadu hypertext engine and Andries Van Dam’s Hypertext Editing System, returning to this origin point for the idea of hypertext, before it became so ubiquitous and multi-purpose, reminds us that the root of this innovation was in the desire of humanity to catalogue and share information, to form the physical links between texts that, to that point, we could form only metaphorically, or through reference. Hypertext would allow--does allow--for intertextuality to function in a dynamic and unprecedented way. Linkages allow both for new reference points to expand ever outward and for textual origins to be traced farther and farther back. The sections that follow will deal primarily with the narrative tools that were created from this system, but it may be useful to keep in mind the humanistic genesis of hypertext and hypertextual ideologies, for they will continue to follow us as we move into the future, to the merging of human and machine intelligence and to questions of hypertextual limitation.

The term “hypertext,” though still in wide and common use, may be somewhat out-of-date, at least for those who study and produce digital media. Where “text” has been adopted across various disciplines, from anthropology to cultural studies, to describe any discrete instance of cultural production--a billboard advertisement is as much a text as a copy of *Dune* or *Swann’s Way*--the designation of most digital content being produced today as *hypertext*, using a more traditional definition of textuality, is largely inaccurate. Digital work is almost always hyper and rarely, if ever, exclusively textual. When the term “hypertext” was proposed by Ted Nelson in 1965, it was proposed alongside a twin term, “hypermedia,” which accounted for all those digital texts which were not purely alphanumeric in nature. However, because computer languages and linguistically-based digital projects were, at the time, of greater interest to researchers, “hypertext” became the dominant term. The first work considered by scholars to be a piece of genuine hypermedia is the Aspen Moviemap, an interactive map of Aspen, Colorado developed at MIT by Peter Clay, Bob Mohl, and Michael Naimark in the late 1970s. Since then, the term has come to encapsulate all forms of digital media which provide links to other various forms of media. A text-based document which contains within itself links to music, news articles, and videos, for example, would be an, albeit straightforward/classic, example of a piece of hypermedia.

I will use the terms “hypermedia” and “hyperfiction” throughout this paper to refer to pieces of multi-modal media which have the quality of hypertext (i.e. those which contain links to discrete pieces of media and whose progressions are not fixed but rather determined by a particular instance of reading) unless quoting from another source.

Video games are, at present, the most popular and rapidly diversifying form of narrative hypermedia, and because of this (as well as their significance to the queer theoretical framework I will employ) I have chosen them as the focus of my analysis. The video games which I will examine fall specifically into a genre known, first pejoratively and now commonly, as “walking simulators.” In such games, reader-players do not begin with an objective from which to proceed through the game; instead they typically “wake up” *en media res* and are given a small invitation into the world of the game--a journal, a letter, a cryptic cutscene--from which they may begin to piece together a purpose. Such games also fit generally into the category of “open world” games, which offer their reader-players relatively unconstrained interactions with the game world. Walking simulators and open world games do not lack narrative, and in fact tend to be the most richly story-driven genre, because game *objective* and game *narrative* should not be confused for one another. Objective may inform narrative, but narrative ultimately exists within the mind and game-experience of the reader-player. As with any hypertextual interaction, the paths chosen and links followed will affect the game narrative differently, and thus also the reader-player’s perception of the text.

This brings me to a final point about terms: I have elected to use the term *reader-player* rather than *reader* to describe the consumers of the texts under consideration, because I believe that the form of these texts makes such a distinction necessary. Although it is entirely possible to argue, from the basis of reader-response theory, etc., that the term *reader* alone implies an active engagement with a text, I wish to make the case that video game hyperfictions are different enough from their textual antecedents to

require a separate term. To call the consumer of a video game a *reader* is, I would argue, to obscure the vital physicality of their endeavor; to call them a *player* is to obfuscate the act of literacy in which they are engaged. To me, *reader-player* as a term marries the formal cerebrality and the sense of embodiment that are reflected in each word respectively.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

George Landow begins *Hypertext 2.0* by stating that “[w]hen designers of computer software examine the pages of *Glas* or *Of Grammatology*, they encounter a digitalized, hypertextual Derrida” (2). There exists in Landow’s work early recognition of the connection between hypertext and critical theory and of the potential for each to inform the other. Hypertext became an academically-acknowledged theorizable entity in the 1980s, but one of the earliest hypertext projects married literary criticism and hypertext by allowing professors and students of English literature to create links within and across digitized canonical texts (Berk & Devlin 14; and others). This combination has an innate sense of cohesion--hyperlinks allow for reflexivity, and for a variety of voices to participate in the annotation of a text. Connections can be made between portions of the text itself, between other texts housed on the internet, between different critics’ analyses of the same passage. Hypermedia was, it seemed in the 1980s, the realization of decades of critical work, the perfect form through which to both create postmodern media and to analyze it. Hypermedia represents, in this sense, the increasingly intertextual nature of how we understand texts.

The advent of hypermedia allows for the even more overt intervention of the reader within the text. As Roland Barthes acknowledges in *S/Z*, “the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (4). He distinguishes between what he calls the *readerly text*, signifying the classical orientation toward literature as static, containing a set interpretation which it is

the reader's job to derive, and the *writerly text*, which allows the reader space to "play" interpretively. The writerly text embraces multivocality between texts, authors, and readers. Indeed, the creators of the Microcosm hypermedia system write in *Rethinking Hypermedia*, "*There should be no artificial distinction between author and reader*" (30, emphasis in text); rather, the reader of a piece of hypermedia should have the capability to create links and connections as they envision.

Any form which the printed word takes, Mark Bernstein reminds us in the third chapter of *Getting Started with Hypertext Narrative*, necessarily constrains the experience of its reader. Bernstein writes with an appeal toward the producers and consumers of hypermedia narratives--narratives characterized by links, situated within the main text, which direct the reader either to external multimedia sources or to other pages within the textual body. In the study of hypermedia narrative, the relationships between the links and the main text can be taxonomized, according to hypermedia theorist and writer Michael Joyce, as follows: "*recursus*, in which the text doubles back on itself, *time shift*, which leaves us in the same place at a different time, and *renewal*," which is not thoroughly described, but which is, in essence, any return to the text that facilitates a new reading of something already encountered--a return with fresh eyes (41). To these categories enumerated by Joyce, Bernstein adds "*annotation*, including expanded exposition, definition, illustrative anecdote, intertextual reflection, lyric, or footnote" (42). Because of the primacy of links in hypermedia narratives, the distinguishing features of such narratives are that they are typically explored by readers in a non-linear fashion, and that their ordering in any given iteration of reading is not

preordained by the writer. That is to say that the writer does not so much *arrange* a particular set of pages, and intra-/intertextual links within/between those pages, as *connect* them in potentially meaningful ways. Each reader's experience of the text as a whole will differ depending on how they choose to follow links, double back, or explore particular textual offerings.

Although reader response and standpoint theories already take precedence in many conversations about how we read texts of any kind, hypermedia pushes these theories to their next logical step. Bernstein posits that readers do not only generate meaning from hypermedia (inter)subjectively, but also (inter)actively create that meaning through direct intervention with the text. This is what he and others have identified as the fundamental revolutionary mechanism in hypermedia: that the reader need not conform their reading to the already-inscribed codex. "The codex," Bernstein argues, "imagines a single ideal reader to which the audience is required to conform, while the computer might allow different readers to follow different links, reorganizing the work to fit their needs and inclinations" (23). This phrasing--"...the computer *might allow*..."--is relatively understated in contrast to a great amount of hypermedia scholarship. Early scholars in particular extolled the computer as the great liberator of narrative form, and envisioned a world in which all meaningful reading would take place within the omnipotent realm of the Web. Now, despite advancements in technological capacity and its obvious appeal for academics, scholarship in hypermedia studies is mainly situated around cognitive and computer sciences, with work in the humanities tending towards analyses of traditional narratives *as* hypertext stories (either as precursors to hypermedia,

or as a method of defining hypermedia itself) and only some analytical attention paid to hypermedia narratives composed explicitly as hypermedia narratives. The dominant scholarly mode is to read, for example, James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* as a hypertextual document, rather than critically examine texts created using a hyperfiction software like StorySpace.

In this latter category, of analyzing hypermedia narratives at face value, much of the recent scholarship on hypermedia's potential to produce alternative ways of writing and reading has come from the corners of critical theory traditionally concerned with generating more radical reading/writing analyses--most notably, though certainly not singularly, feminist studies. Many scholars of hypertext have become divested of their initially utopian views of hypermedia's potential. Daniel Punday, for instance, writing of game narratives, notes "how tightly hypertexts can control reading" in their use of links and guard fields, far from their imagined use as liberatory technologies (81). Scholars working within feminist frameworks, however, have retained the interest of early hypertext pioneers in the radical possibilities of hypermedia to generate both new narrative forms and new relationships to those forms. Early proponents of hypermedia saw the technological shift as a herald of a brave new world in narrative, a space where the reader would be afforded more agency in textual creation, and feminist scholars taking up this stance viewed hypermedia as a potential expression of Hélène Cixous' *écriture féminine*, the writing of women intended to express a state of "feminine" existence and cognition:

You will have literary texts that tolerate all kinds of freedom--unlike the more classical texts--which are not texts that delimit themselves, are not texts of territory with neat borders, with chapters, with beginnings, endings, etc., and which will be a little disquieting because you will not feel the arrest, the edge. (Cixous qtd. in Conley 137)

The shift toward this understanding of hypermedia writing as a space in which traditional narrative forms are redefined or restructured is, some scholars argue, fundamentally rooted in early feminist literary movements, with their ideologies finding ready expression in digital hyper-forms. Hypermedia thus can be conceptualized as an experimental form, at least insofar as it is a form which lends itself easily to experimental content.

In “Women Writers and the Restive Text: Feminism, Experimental Writing, and Hypertext,” Barbara Page views the adoption of hypermedia by female writers as a natural extension of the experimental fiction written by women in the early 20th century and beyond, a reflection of the desire to “write against the norms of ‘realist’ narrative from a consciousness stirred by feminist discourses of resistance, especially those informed by poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory” (n. pag.). These texts are experiential in their construction, focused around the negotiation of memory and the senses, and interested in translating this experience to readers via narratives that move outside of a linear conception of time. Hyperfiction allows for such an experience by utilizing the techniques described earlier by Joyce--*recursus*, *time-shift*, and *renewal*--all of which contribute to a sense of destabilized reality. While all of hypermedia may be

theorized through a feminist lens, as Page argues that it “[opens] itself to interventions by readers turned writers, who can if they choose add to, subtract from, or rearrange the text...[and] allows for one realization of the feminist aim articulated by Retallack: ‘an invitation to the other’s discourse,’” there are qualities that may distinguish particular pieces of hypermedia as explicitly *feminist* (or, in Cixous’ conception, *feminine*).

George Landow, writing in *Hypertext 2.0*, identifies the primary feature in feminist hypermedia as the willingness of the writer to share control of the narrative with the reader, which stands in contrast to the agential constraints of both the codex and standard hypermedia narratives. Landow and author-theorist Robert Coover identify the multitude of links presented in standard hypermedia as a system of *choice* but not explicitly of *agency*--calling back to Punday’s assertion that a preponderance of links becomes, almost paradoxically, a way of tightly controlling the reader’s experience. The reader is “responsive [and] attentive” to the choices presented them, but not “active” in the sense of becoming a mutual participant in the narrative itself (206). On the other hand, feminist hypermedia, as Landow and Coover argue, generates a collaborative space, where the reader engages with the text as a co-creator, and often has insight into the text’s design and functioning. Carolyn Guyer’s hypermedia narrative *Quibbling*, for example, offers readers both a standard and a topographical view of the text which they may move through and engage with at will. In describing her decision to afford the reader more agency in their engagement with the text, Guyer argues against the style of linking that characterizes many hypermedia narratives: “I’ve always felt dense linkage meant more options for the reader, and so greater likelihood of her taking the thing for her own.

But this idea now seems wrong to me. Excessive linkage can actually be seen as something of an insult, and certainly more directive” (206). For her, the collaborative qualities of hypermedia are intrinsically connected to the aims of feminist textual production: “We know that being denied personal authority inclines us to prefer...decentered contexts, and we have learned, especially from our mothers, that the woven practice of women’s intuitive attention and reasoned care is a fuller, more balanced process than simple rational linearity” (206). Here we might see a divide between the discourse of hypermedia in general, which tends to cite the “non-linearity” of all hypermedia narratives, and the discourse of feminist hypermedia, whose creators identify most hypermedia as still linearly constituted in that it nevertheless forces readers to engage with some form of linked progression.

It might be said that these feminist hypermedia texts are more directly immersive than their counterparts, while still allowing for the reader’s co-creation of the narrative, often in a seamless way. Kate Pullinger’s 2004 hypermedia novel *The Breathing Wall* tells the story of a man falsely accused of the murder of his girlfriend. The narrative is set in the prison where he is haunted by the presence of his ghostly paramour and delivered through realistic flashbacks as well as dream sequences, whose content changes depending on the breathing rate of the reader (monitored through a headset microphone). Speaking of her decision to seek out new styles of linking in hypermedia, Pullinger says:

That is a big problem with hypertext. I mean, for me that [having to stop reading to click on a series of links] is what stops me from enjoying it. As a person who writes print fiction, the best thing anyone can say to me is that “they couldn’t put

it down.” What more can you ask for? In a way, that is why I was drawn to Stefan’s software, because I was thinking, maybe, this is a way of using the vast possibilities of multimedia in a way that can create page turning and that feeling of not wanting it to stop...We have to breath[e]. It is transparent...[I]t’s transparent in the way the turning a page of a book is. We are so used to it that we don’t have to think about it. (qtd. in Grigar 477)

The increasingly immersive quality of hypermedia--and, indeed, all new media--has historically garnered polarized response: on the one hand, we are inclined to fear the loss of our humanity to tech-driven experience; on the other, we find new modes through which to tell the stories we have always wanted to tell. Pullinger’s merging of body and text evokes the “feelies” of Huxley’s *Brave New World*, but Janet Murray and feminist scholars remind us that hypermedia’s immersive, non-linear qualities do not debase our humanity when they allow us agency within narrative. The fear of the loss of humanity, as expressed by a loss of linearity, is reflected in masculinist dystopias--*Brave New World*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Neuromancer*, *Lawnmower Man*--but *l’écriture féminine* speaks to an embrace of human feelings and the grotesque. In hypermedia, these become possible insofar as the reader is not merely a passive-but-attentive spectator. Readers of *The Breathing Wall*, for example, must consciously adapt their breathing--slowing it in a mindful way--in order to experience certain outcomes within the narrative. There is a sense of being “caught up” in the anxiety of the narrative, the dream sequences, but alongside this exists a sense of real engagement with the text--a trial-and-error through which the reader must become conscious of themselves and their relationship to the story.

The same sort of engagement with narrative can be found in readers' interactions with video games, in which the outcome of a game is physically brought into being by the actions of a reader. This physicality is explored within the realm of feminist studies, but the inherent hybridity of video game texts as well as the acknowledgement of player engagement as embodiment has opened the door to queer theory analyses of video games--specifically analyses of how the reader/player physically interfaces with the textual world. Where feminist studies have always been concerned with the discourse of the feminine and what it means to disrupt or decenter the "masculine" ordering of a text--in this case, creating narratives in which readers move through associations based in feelings, memory, and the senses rather than through more traditional narrative forms--queer studies aim to move beyond decentering or "reversing the terms on each side of the slash" and into an exploration of what might exist outside of binary itself.

There is some danger that any theorizing of feminist or queer media as being expressive of *feminine* or *queer* tropes will tend toward essentialism. Indeed, much of the feminist theory that is applied to hypermedia studies emerges directly out of Hélène Cixous' concept of *l'écriture féminine*, which can be read as somewhat essentialist--the idea that there is a "feminine" way to write versus a "masculine" way to write which is the cultural default, and that women can locate themselves more easily in one than the other. I believe that the danger lies in claiming that this configuration is inherent or universal in some way. Those who subscribe to the idea of an *écriture* for women, or for queer people, don't make that claim; rather, they're working within the operating constructs of society, observing that we have decided to ascribe certain qualities to the

term *masculine* and others to its supposed binary opposite *feminine*, and attempting to deconstruct the valuation of these terms and their connotations. Ultimately this is to upend the notion that the forms of writing, or speech, or reason that we privilege in society are necessarily “right” or the most valuable to all people. They use the term “masculine” to describe these forms of writing/speech/reason because that framework has been used for so long that it is almost impossible to disentangle without some serious intellectual legwork (although there are scholars attempting this feat); because it is important to recognize how power dynamics are configured in order to subvert them; and because it is almost insignificant which binary one draws the lines along, as any language use would reveal that a binary is being employed (for example, if we were to replace “masculine” and “feminine” with “logical” and “emotional” or “concrete” and “abstract”).

To trace this intellectual line now to my project and the work of queer scholarship in hypermedia, I believe that the goal is to take the anti-essentialist aim one step farther, to identify that the system of language in which we operate, as well as proposed alternative systems (like *l'écriture féminine*) constantly privilege material awareness of binaries; they merely “move the terms to the other side of the slash” so that *male/female* becomes *female/male*. Queer theory attempts to subvert binarism entirely, or at least reveal the hypocrisy of such a dynamic. The texts I will analyze in the subsequent sections play with the notion of identity and estrangement in very immediate ways. This is where we can begin to break from the idea that we might be imposing an essential queerness onto texts, in essence saying “this is how queer media *looks*,” by instead

comprehending the parts of the texts theoretically and identifying how the texts ask to be read vis-à-vis identity. We might say that, in general, queer media takes up issues of identity in ways which attempt to reveal the problems of working in binaries.

One way of framing this problem is to center the conversation around the multivarious locus of the body, and how reader-players physically enact themselves, and are, themselves, enacted, in game spaces. Games offer a particularly rich site from which to view this dynamic, for they exist as a concept in the reader-player's imagination and equally as a physical reality. Such a duality exists in traditional narrative texts, too, of course, but as has already been noted, these texts are pre-inscribed and the set of choices a reader may make about that text is comparatively limited: the reader may read the text as it has been written and codexed; they may resist the text and read it out of order, which, because we are talking about a text with a predetermined order of operations, will likely result in disorder that may be inhibitive to understanding rather than generative; or they may choose not to read the text at all. The physical reality of these texts is static. Hypermedia, by comparison, opposes stasis and presents a proliferation of choice. It must, by definition, be read in an immediately physical, participatory way, in that it cannot fulfill its purpose as a text until it is acted upon by a reader (or reader-player). Video game hyperfictions, particularly "open-world" games, which offer comparatively limited constraints on reader-players' choices, allow for both embodiment and more active resistant readings/playings. This is, in part, what makes these texts especially salient to queer theoretical analysis. In the third chapter of *Queer Game Studies*, Derek A. Burrill argues for queer game theory as the next wave of critical engagement within game

studies, and establishes that the discourse of a queer game theory would necessarily be centered around the body and agency of the player in resisting or conforming to particular structures within the game narrative. He writes that queer game studies and studies of queer narratology can be understood as “a methodology that postulates discourse-as-*imagination*, signaling a queer-inflected emphasis on the player’s agency in, and resistance to, the unpacking of rules and systems of control” (27). By this he means to focus the critic’s attention toward an emphasis on the *reader-player* in addition to the classical critical focus on the text itself. The primacy of the reader-player-as-*interpreter* reflects the queer theoretical turn toward lived experience and embodiment.

Jacqueline Rhodes calls hypermedia texts which emphasize the physical dynamic between reader-player and textual world “*queertext*,” defined as hyperfictions which “resist textual dominance through [their] emphasis on the material, erotic realities of our bodies” (387). The body, with all of its constraints and possibilities, is key to understanding so much of what queer theory aims to do. Queer theory represents a disruptive shift in academic discourses that consistently operate from a kind of Cartesian dualism: it is the mind which comes first and allows the body to be. Queer theoretical frameworks embrace the unity of mind and body, and, in some instances, flip the order of valuation. The body is the means by which we first experience the world, and it is through the mind that we then interpret it. I acknowledge that the process itself is more complex than even this phrasing permits, for to attempt to identify an order of interpretive operation obscures the degree to which interpretation begins at the moment of experience. Rhodes’ “resist[ance to] textual dominance” exemplifies the difficulties

and promises of a theoretical framework that combines theories of the body with theories of the mind. The “text” has traditionally been separated from the body, but queertexts, hypertexts, and video games bring reader-players into direct and meaningful *bodily* interaction with textual elements.

With Rhodes, and as well as in Burrill’s article, we can begin to chart a separation of queer studies of narrative from feminist studies of the same. In the queer narratology postulated here, the text represents a site of active resistance to dominant structures, and the knowledge and internal sign system of the player--who is, in Roland Barthes’ words, “already [themselves] a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite” (*S/Z* 10)--likewise actively constitute the text’s resistant elements. It is through interaction, through embodied trial-and-error, that a reader-player’s identity within the game may emerge alongside a narrative. It must be noted that a queer narratology, by virtue of its reliance on notions of queerness, necessitates an examination of difference and familiarity, of what is close to the reader, and of what exists in the text to be identified with. In the world of immersive textual experience, the reader must navigate bodily the available identities presented by the textual world and choose what they will take up. The extent to which they will resist the available choices, and the implications of the relationship that emerges, are central to queer hypermedia studies.

Sara Ahmed speaks to this process of self-orientation in the introduction to *Queer Phenomenology*, in which she explores, drawing upon well established phenomenological literature, what it means to become orientated, or to orientate oneself. Again, an awareness of the physical, of the body, is foregrounded, and though she writes broadly

about phenomenological orientation in “reality,” her delineation between the familiar and the strange and the manner in which bodies both shape and are shaped by their environments, holds true for the hypermedia narratives under consideration here. Like the feminist scholars whose work she draws from, Ahmed’s primary orientation is toward the relationship between bodies and emotions in that “[e]motions shape what bodies do in the present, or how they are moved by the objects they approach” (2). In the movement toward queer theorization, the position of the body (of both the writer and the reader) is given equivalence to the mind, and this equivalency has particular relevance to the unique dynamics of video games.

In video games, the reader (arguably a cognitive position) is also the player (a position enacted physically), and the experience of this hybrid reader-player is shaped by an approach to the text which privileges both cognitive awareness and an embodied, physical, emotional engagement. As the reader-player progresses through a given game, they will draw upon the literacies already in their possession in order to make sense of the world into which they have entered. Moreover, the reader-player is likewise tasked with navigating the textual world through the perspective of a player-character, which requires that they assume an identity which is, on some level necessarily, estranged. The factors which determine the degree of estrangement between the reader-player and the player-character are many--and include factors outside of the scope of this project, such as predominant user demographics--but the most interesting for the purposes of my analysis are those which are inherent to the texts themselves, which require their reader-players,

as a condition of participation, to negotiate an identity which is either unknown, shifting, or otherwise made queer.

METHODOLOGY AND INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK

What might a queer theoretical approach to hyperfiction look like? As in the discussion of feminist hypermedia, where the intersection of reader production and reader interpretation predominates, two related but distinct questions emerge here: First, what does it mean to produce queer hypermedia? Second, does queer theory analysis have a place in the interpretation of hypermedia? If the answer to the second question is yes, how might we go about conducting such analyses? And, perhaps most importantly, what does a model of queer hypermedia analysis have to offer both producers and consumers of these texts?

If feminist hyperfictions are those which emphasize the reader's active participation in the construction of the narrative, beyond that which is inherent to all reading, then queer hyperfictions make this relationship physical. Queer theory is interested, even more than feminist studies, in the relationship between the consciousness and the body; as well, it is interested in the various ways in which subjectivities are constructed. At its foundation, queer theory rejects the notion of a fixed or inherent identity-state and thus seems to be an ideal means to analyze video game hyperfictions which afford their reader-players a relatively versatile player identity, whether that entails the ability to recursively experience the narrative through the perspectives of multiple characters or, at the opposite extreme, entails having no real "player character" identity at all. It is important to distinguish here that, for the purposes of this definitional undertaking, queer hypermedia is best represented by video games inasmuch as they

emphasize the reader-player's embodiment of the narrative. Even more specifically, it is possible that queer hypermedia is best represented by "open world" video games, for they offer the least amount of imposed narrative structuring and are therefore typologically closest to the kinds of unconstrained narratives envisioned by many scholars of hypermedia.

Given these lines of thought, we might begin to identify queer hypermedia and an accompanying "queer hypermedia theory" as a potential continuation of the feminist hypermedia movement towards heightened reader (or, in the case of video games, reader-player) agency. Queer games are not simply those whose plotlines and array of characters take up issues of sexual/gender orientation, but those which engage questions of identity at an intimate level. Feminist responses to video games historically have suggested--in parallel with feminist responses to the Western literary canon--that the default "identity" available to reader-players is almost entirely that of a heterosexual, cisgendered, and typically white/Western/Anglophone male. In response, game developers have begun to offer more possibilities for female player characters in games across a variety of genres. Queer hypermedia, however, goes beyond this binary conception, male/female, and troubles the consideration of identity as a fixed point at all. The reader-player is often invited to explore the textual world in the body/identity of a player character that is, in some way, "made strange" to them. Take, as one example, the *Shelter* franchise, a series in which the reader-player explores an open world as either a mother badger or a mother lynx, protecting their offspring from realistic natural dangers. Or *The First Tree*, in which players alternate, in parallel storylines, between playing as a fox and as a young boy. In

“The Default Reader and a Model of Queer Reading and Writing Strategies,” Hanna Kubowitz identifies “queer writing strategies” as authorial strategies which “authors may apply in order to convey queer meanings without addressing them explicitly” and “queer textual structures” as “structures, exhibited or implied in a text, which yield to queer readings” (202-3). In our attempt to define what a piece of queer hypermedia could look like, then, we may say that games which we might describe as “queer” are those which, as a part of their structure, attempt to complicate (or *queer* as a verb) the reader-player’s relationship to the player-character that they, themselves, are meant to take the place of, through strategies that create an initial sense of estrangement in the reader-player.

It is necessary to note that the lack of a one-to-one relationship between reader-player and player-character in these cases should be inherent to the game structure and not a tacit result of the heterosexual matrix (see Butler, “Gender Trouble”) in which these video game texts reside. In traditional analysis of literature, it was long assumed that the author and narrator, as well as the reader reading through the perspective of the narrator, were one and the same; similarly, in game studies, the prevailing notion of the relationship between reader-player and player-character was one of identification, of sameness. One of the defining features of the New Criticism was the identification of the author, and reader, as separate from the narrator, and all of the theoretical corollaries to this thought have served to continually define a sort of formal literary theory. A similar shift can be seen in game studies, where for decades the image of a “one size fits all” player-character has persisted. In dismantling the illusion of a unified perspective, we may begin to identify the forces which act upon a textual work, including, most vitally to

this paper, our own situated cognition as readers. Queer hypermedia continues the feminist tradition of recognizing that reader-players with identities that are not encapsulated within a masculine or heteronormative paradigm have long been required to identify (sometimes bodily, as in the case of video games) with a perspective that is not their own.

In the sections that follow, I will attempt to further an understanding of queer hypermedia through the examination of two video games, *Gone Home* and *What Remains of Edith Finch*, and explore how these games exemplify the queer textual structures under discussion here: in particular, open narratives; variable player-character identity; and object relations, particularly those which emphasize estrangement and familiarity. I will use as my framework the model of queer phenomenology developed and explained by Sara Ahmed in concert with other queer theoretical approaches to textual analysis and video game studies. I will examine how the queer textual structures described before present themselves in each game, as well as how these structures constrain or contribute to the experience of the reader-player as they encounter and construct the games' narratives.

What might this research offer us, as readers, critics, and thinking consumers and producers of hypermedia? Fundamentally, my aim is to recognize the various ways in which identity is construed across these platforms, and propose that games which we might call "queer games" are those which invite their reader-players to more actively engage in intimate explorations of identity. They are disquieting in their structure precisely because we are, many of us, accustomed to taking our identities for granted. We

are accustomed to games which attempt to occlude the separation of the reader-player and the player-character. But queer games, and, I argue, a theory of queer games which is applicable to all games which exhibit particular structures, moves us beyond this paradigm by allowing us to see its workings. We might, through this endeavor, find analogous structures in our textually-mediated reality.

GOING HOME: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXTS

Sara Ahmed describes the salience of the strangeness/familiarity dynamic and its significance to orientation, in ourselves and in the world: “If orientations are as much about feeling at home as they are about finding our way, then it becomes important to consider how ‘finding our way’ involves what we could call ‘homing devices.’ In a way, we learn what home means, or how we occupy space at home and as home, when we leave home” (9). *Gone Home* and *What Remains of Edith Finch* are both games about leaving, and returning to, home. Both of these texts will be examined in the sections that follow, through a queer theoretical lens that will take into account these texts’ utilization of open-world narratives, the way that object relations are structured, and how the player-character/reader-player’s identity is construed within the game space. Before this breakdown, however, it would be beneficial to introduce the basic elements of the texts themselves: their gameplay and basic plots, as well as some of the similarities between them and why I consider them particularly good texts to apply our emerging theoretical framework to. These are, of course, not the only--or even the best--texts to use to discuss a theory of queer hypermedia, but they are elegant in their relative simplicity (as opposed to, for example, procedurally-generated open world games), and allow for a clear view of the individual elements under consideration. Games and hypermedia projects which may be of interest to scholars for further application and exploration of this queer theoretical

model will be described in a later chapter. For now, let us acquaint ourselves with the texts that will serve as the basis for the analysis to follow.

Gone Home begins on a dark porch in the middle of storm; you are locked out of your family's new house (which they moved into after you left for college); the space is unfamiliar, and no one else appears to be present. After exploring the porch for a while, learning some of the rules of this new world, you find the front door key under a ceramic Christmas duck. This event marks the start of a hyperfiction in which you, as the reader-player, are left to explore the contents of the house that, until the date of your arrival, was inhabited by your parents and younger sister. The house lies in the subtle disarray of most lived-in spaces, and in this way is immediately familiar--old receipts can be found shoved to the back of the cabinet in the foyer, and books are discovered in odd corners of the house--but the unknown circumstances by which the house came to be abandoned, and the inherent discomfort of having to explore a dark, multi-story house on a stormy night, when many of the lights will not remain on and some of the most vital narrative elements occur in the attic and basement, generates a kind of strangeness that cannot be escaped even as the game progresses. There are two related elements of this game which are most salient to bring into conversation with our developing idea of queer phenomenology: the reader-player's relationship to objects (as well as how those relationships construct the narrative's meaning) and the construction of identity within the game space.

The gameplay itself is relatively straightforward--the reader-player navigates the house using a set of simple navigational keys, examines items (including books, letters, crumpled notes, and assorted documents), and discovers audio diaries that steadily reveal

one of several underlying narratives: the development of the younger sister Sam's relationship with another young woman, Lonnie. It is in its multivarious narrative elements that the game's complexity truly lies, for it represents an open world in which the hypertextual constraints on the reader, like those discussed by Carolyn Guyer and Kate Pullinger, are minimal and narratively naturalistic. It may be advantageous here to discuss relative degrees of openness in these narratives. All hypermedia will naturally-- simply because they are created by an individual person, or set of people, and meant to be experienced through a limited mode--constrain the reader's experience of the world. For example, the reader could not choose to tunnel through the ground or construct an aeroplane if such options were not already programmatically possible within the text. However, hypermedia narratives that are considered "open world" provide fewer of particular constraints--most typically, narrative or gameplay objective--on the reader. Even within this sub-genre of hypermedia, there are degrees of pre-programmed freedom. Compare *No Man's Sky*, a game which boasts the yet-largest open world platform ever released, allowing the reader-player to explore a procedurally-generated universe including 18 quintillion planets, to *Shelter 2*, also an "open world" game, in which the reader-player is limited to an exploration of tundra, forests, rivers, and (with the addition of an expansion pack) mountains.

In the case of *Gone Home*, the text represents the end of the "open world" spectrum that is closer to containment--the reader-player is confined to exploring a house, and the textual features which may be engaged with are, for the most part, limited--but, as with other, more open texts, the progression of events is not deterministic. One feature of

the text, the audio diaries created by Sam and discovered by the reader over the course of gameplay, illustrates this point. The order in which the audio diaries are encountered will naturally differ depending on the manner in which the reader-player explores the house, as well as on which items catch their eye,² and although the diaries themselves are sequenced (in one, Sam describes her plan to befriend Lonnie by challenging her to a game of *Streetfighter*; in another, she describes the failure of that plan), the comprehension of their meaning is not contingent in any way on the order in which they are discovered. Because of this, the reader-player's perception of the gameworld is constantly evolving, and will differ on each re-visitation.

Over the course of the game, the reader-player encounters a multitude of everyday objects over which they have some degree of control--from picking up a book and examining it, discovering a mixtape and placing it in a cassette player, or simply opening and closing a pizza box lid--and the significance of these objects is always multivocal. This is to say that, as in all sign systems, the mixtape derives its meaning from the content of the book previously examined, and the pizza box is placed in its cultural context by the mixtape. Landow touches upon the close interconnectedness of signs in internal sign systems when discussing the cohesion generated in Carolyn Guyer's feminist hyperfiction: "The links that join [the] lexias do not produce straight-ahead, or even eddying, narratives but instead generate an open montage-textuality...in which

² I, for example, did not notice that a bottle of red hair dye--an item which unlocks one of the key audio diaries--had been spilled in the tub of the upstairs bathroom until I read an article in which the author described her experience of playing the game ("On *Gone Home*" by Merritt Kopas). This is not a fluke in the game development, but in fact an integral element of its design.

lexias echo one another, gathering meaning to themselves and sharing it with other, apparently unrelated patches of writing” (207).

Following in the tradition of Guyer, the reader-player is restricted not in terms of which objects they may interact with, but in the kinds of interactions they may have, and not every interaction will naturally produce a narratively salient result (there are, for example, many cabinet drawers which open to nothing). As Guyer says of her decision to eschew “dense linkage” in her hyperfiction, “In the end, I find I cannot bring myself to make the physical links that are inherent in the writing, that is, the ‘obvious’ ones (the motifs of glass, water, hands, color, walking, etc.)” (qtd. in Landow 206). A similar philosophy seems to be at work with the connective links of *Gone Home*, whose themes of buried truth and hidden identities would seem to suggest that a scintillating revelation hides at the back of every drawer. Such revelations are, of course, present in the game, alongside some truly strange finds, like a pentagram with the photo of the deceased uncle at the center, discovered behind a wall panel in the downstairs hallway, but many object interactions are also mundane, the opening of a well-stocked refrigerator or the moving of a tissue box.

Not every object contributes directly to the development of the Sam-Lonnie narrative by revealing one of the audio diaries, but this is also not the only story to be found within the game; it is simply, quite literally, the loudest, peppered as it is with punk rock mixtapes and “riot grrl” paraphernalia. A given reader-player may find that other potential narratives within the game hold more interest, and all are connected intratextually through the various objects and sidequests the reader-player may choose to

engage with (or not). For example, as the reader-player discovers books on parenting “troubled teens,” pamphlets advertising a marriage counseling retreat, and well-hidden letters written to the mother by a man who is not her husband, the impression becomes one of the younger sister’s story forming the background over which the dissolution of the parents’ marriage plays out. Or one may find that the history of the deceased uncle and his occult interests is the most salient narrative to explore, as it is the literal foundation atop which the present-day events play out, with many of this narrative’s secrets residing in the basement and walls of the house. Regardless of which narrative arc takes precedence on any given reading, each object interaction contributes to the immersive quality of the game and the sense that the reader-player is not only *reading* or *playing*, not visiting a world that has been created simply for them to discover the designer’s intended meaning, but that they are constructing meaning within that world.

Edith Finch plays with similar dynamics between game world and reader-player. In this game, the reader-player experiences the narrative through an even more ambiguous player-character than that of *Gone Home*, in that they are unnamed and remain unreferenced within the world of the game until the narrative’s end reveal. In order to advance the narrative, the reader-player must, also as in *Gone Home*, interact with objects in a house, which interactions lead to exposition about the Finch family, the deaths of various family members, and ultimately result in the revelation of the player-character’s identity as Christopher Finch, the son of the eponymous Edith Finch, who died in childbirth. Like *Gone Home*, *Edith Finch* operates on the assumption that the reader-player will choose to explore the various objects and rooms in the house around

which the game centers, and does not provide options to leave the house or its grounds. Exposition is revealed in the form of voice-over narration of diary entries written by Edith Finch, as well as, in a break from the setup of *Gone Home*, cutscenes and interactive sequences in which the reader-player may experience dramatized versions of the Finch family members' individual deaths.

The structure of the game, and its interwoven narratives, is multi-layered. The reader-player begins by reading the journal of Edith Finch while aboard a ship en route to Orca Island, Washington. As the journal's narrative begins, the reader-player assumes the perspective (and control) of a young Edith Finch, returning to the family home on that same island, the journey that the reader-player is, themselves, about to take. The reader-player then explores the house as Edith, encountering the lexias that comprise her journal as they encounter various objects around the home. Over the course of Edith's investigation, she comes across items that unlock narratives told through the perspectives of her deceased family members, and at these moments, the reader-player, through Edith, assumes the identities of these characters in order to witness the salient moments of their lives and final days. On its face, *Edith Finch* appears to be engaged in a more complex exploration of identity than *Gone Home*, but I will argue that both are effective in their disruption of reader-player-to-player-character identity, even as they both take up this issue from opposing ends of a spectrum. Both texts are "doing queer things" in their construction of the relationship between reader-player and player-character

Upon each return to the game,³ as each visitation reveals more depth and leaves more questions, the reader-player generates a greater feeling or sense of the place itself, another point which Ahmed emphasizes in her introduction: “Familiarity is shaped by the ‘feel’ of space or by how spaces ‘impress’ upon bodies...The familiar is an effect of inhabitation; we are not simply *in* the familiar, but rather the familiar is shaped by actions that reach out toward objects that are already within reach” (7, emphasis added). The gamespace becomes familiar by increments, but there is always a sense of separation, of queerness, maintained by virtue of the house’s secrecy. The reader-player has the sense that no matter how much they come to inhabit the house, a new trip to the basement always has the potential to reveal something new, and possibly dangerous. The Sam-Lonnie narrative becomes, then, an anchor of familiarity across repeat playings of the game, a narrative whose emotional development, though it deals explicitly with *queerness* as an identity construct, does not seek to disrupt the reader-player’s own sense of identity.

³ An element which is almost built into gameplay, because one can “win” (finish) the game without discovering every audio diary or encountering all of the house’s mysteries and clues.

ANALYSIS OF THE TEXTS

Open Worlds

The so-called “open-world” or “walking simulator” game is typified by an absence of overt narrative objective. Reader-players enter the space without a stated task, and must, in a sense, design the narrative through their interactions with particular objects. Before *Gone Home* begins in earnest, the reader-player is given only a hint as to the world they are about to enter, and no sense of objective whatsoever. A voice message from the player-character to her mother plays over a black screen, and then the reader-player finds themselves standing on the front porch, with a set of luggage and a locked door before them. In *Edith Finch* the preamble is the construct of the game itself: The player-character is traveling somewhere on a boat and is reading the diary of Edith Finch on the journey. Both setups effectively provide only the most minimal introductions to the storyworld, but most reader-players know, at least, the fundamentals of navigating a video game world. The controls themselves are typical of most games, but the narrative framework differs. Contrast these games with, for example, games in the popular *Halo* franchise, where each level begins with either a non-player character (NPC) or the game world’s AI system informing the reader-player of their level objective.

Systems of advancement also differ. In his seminal game studies text *Half-Real*, Jesper Juul identifies most video game texts as games of *progression*, in which “the

player must perform a predefined sequence of events” and “[i]f the player does not perform the right actions, the game is over” (73). He contrasts this paradigm with games of *emergence*: “In a game of emergence, a large percentage of the rules and objects in the game can potentially influence each other... [T]he exact path of each piece always potentially matters to every other piece” (81-82). Open-world games typify the properties of emergence. They do not have “levels,” though they may offer maps, either of the game world or of the narrative itself. There is no system of increasing difficulty, and the game may be finished (though never *won* in the sense that other games may be won, through the fulfillment of a predetermined objective) with different parameters met every time. In *Gone Home*, for example, there are twenty-three journal entries that may be discovered while exploring the house, but it is possible to end the game without finding them all. The structure of the game is such that parameters are created as the game world is explored by a particular reader-player. On my first iteration of playing the game, my exploratory path did not lead me to locating the passcode to unlock the filing cabinet in the father’s office; that narrative was closed off to me, but did not prevent me from finishing the game. On a later playthrough, one in which my objective was to better understand the relationship between the father and the deceased uncle, I intentionally sought out the filing cabinet passcode. Thus we might say, albeit somewhat reductively, that in a “closed-world” or linear game, the enticement of the game is learning (through doing and re-doing) how to meet the criteria required at each level to “win” that level. For open-world games, the enticement is exploration and discovery, the uncovering of new information.

Objects

Open worlds are sites in which the reader-player controls the rate and manner in which this information is uncovered through their interactions with objects. Part of what makes open world games “textually queer” is, perhaps paradoxically, their adherence to the vagaries of material--i.e. non-game--reality. In linear games, the program is typically designed such that game elements that do not serve to advance the objective cannot be interacted with--for example, if it is not relevant that glass can be broken in a game, no matter how many times a player might strike a window with any object, the glass will not shatter. If an object on a table is irrelevant to the game’s plot, it is inaccessible to the reader-player. By contrast, the world of *Gone Home* is populated by quotidian objects, the majority of which, when interacted with, do not unlock any new narrative components. *Gone Home* does, of course, impose limitations on the interactions that reader-players may have with the game world, but these are comparatively minimal. Reader-players, in fact, encounter more objects that are seemingly devoid of narrative relevance--cups, tissue boxes, plates--than those which directly serve some kind of narrative end. And those objects which do unlock an audio diary, or reveal more about any of the other possible narratives within the game, do not stand out in any overt way. There is no glowing symbol above them to specify them as important items--in fact, they may be entirely overlooked.

This point is vital to understanding how reader-players interact with the objects in non-linear hypermedia narratives over multiple iterations. In a world whose demarcations of significance look remarkably “lifelike,” the task of narrative generation is significantly agent-centered. Early on in his hour-long playthrough of *Gone Home*, YouTube reviewer

TheRadBrad, attempting to locate himself within a game which does not invite pre/proscriptive readings of identity, grafts language from linear gameplay onto the open world: “You’re just supposed to explore this house; that’s the whole objective of the game.” Indeed, the notion of “objective” is almost entirely absent in the opening moments of the game--before the reader-player has had time to become oriented to the space and interact with objects and their associated narrative threads--beyond the understanding, implicit in virtually every game, that the reader-player must be *doing* something. Queer games, through their presentation of objects without apparent tasks or ends, subvert this paradigm, often quite subtly. It is only through consistent engagement with the game world, through attention to its objects and lexias, that reader-players become familiar with a world initially made strange. Over the course of his playthrough, which functions as a think-aloud protocol for the development of his understanding of the game, TheRadBrad comes to a similar conclusion, noting that *Gone Home*’s open-world structure presents “storytelling through what’s happening in the game, not [narratively]... It’s storytelling through objects in the game.”

In his description of the world of *Edith Finch*, video game reviewer Matt Peckham reflects a similar understanding of the relationship between reader-players and objects in the walking simulator:

[Y]ou wander at leisure through solemn spaces designed to offer as much or as little information as you’re willing to gather through patient observation... It’s like being the single autonomous presence in a melancholy museum, witness to the bric-a-brac of the dead, each inanimate tableau charged with meaning. You

can race through the house clicking on conspicuous visual triggers that set the next sequence in motion, but you'll miss much of the table.

As Peckham mentions here, unlike the ambiguity of objects in *Gone Home*, which do not signal their significance using overt game tropes, *Edith Finch*'s game mechanic employs a visual cue, a small pair of illuminated white hands, that appears above significant objects when approached by the reader-player. This kind of signaling is vital for triggering the game's embedded sequences, or visual lexias, in which the reader-player experiences the deaths of each member of the Finch family, but the game world is developed in such a way that the richly populated field of "non-significant" objects still function, not as a backdrop, but as vital elements in the construction of a narrative.

The narrative effect of background should not be overlooked in the examination of open-world games. Because in *Gone Home* virtually no items resist interaction, it may be argued that the text presents a more "open" field for narrative generation. However, though it places slightly more restriction on the reader-player's ability to interact with individual objects, *Edith Finch* relies on the perceptive reader-player to engage in the same reading strategies as they encounter the mass of quotidian objects that fill the Finch house. The bedroom of each deceased relative that the reader-player encounters contains objects beyond those displayed in cutscenes, and which, if attended to, offer deeper insight into the content of the cutscenes (which, themselves, recursively influence the reader-player's perception of the house and grounds itself). Sara Ahmed quotes Edmund Husserl's discussion of the place of peripheral objects in generating meaning through perception:

In perception properly so-called, as an explicit awareness (*Gewahren*), I am turned towards the object, to the paper, for instance, I apprehend it as being this here and now. The apprehension is a singling out, every perceived object having a background in experience. Around and about the paper lie books, pencils, ink-well, and so forth, and these in a certain sense are also ‘perceived’ perpetually there, in the ‘field of intuition’ (Husserl qtd. in Ahmed 25).

We may take a similar stance (or orientation) toward the objects in *Edith Finch*. The elements which comprise the perceptual field in any given moment of the game can be apprehended as part of a larger structure, as informing the object under examination, even if they cannot be directly accessed. They are integral to the storyworld and, thus, to any narrative which may be perceived therein. Additionally, any relationship between objects and reader-player must be co-constitutive: the reader-player constructs a narrative from the preponderance of objects, all of which carry signification, while at the same time the objects orient the reader towards an identity within the game world.

Most video games rely, at least in part, on the development of an identification between the reader-player and the player-character, and much criticism from both feminist and queer studies of games centers around the choices that are available for reader-players to identify with in a given game. For decades, options for reader-players of non-white, non-heterosexual-or-cisgendered, non-masculine identities were limited, reflective of what the industry perceived its largest buying demographic to be. In recent years, as both criticism and the creation of games which directly counter such presentations of identity have garnered mainstream attention, the field of game studies

has increasingly opened to critical analyses of player character choices as inhibitors of or conduits for greater reader-player identification with the game content and narrative. *Gone Home* does not concern itself with such questions of identification--or, rather, it leaves space, an opening, for the reader-player's identity to interface with the game and produce a new, contingent identity. This opening can be thought of, too, in the sense of absence. As Merritt Kopas writes in "On *Gone Home*," "I know I'm bringing a lot of my own stuff to this game. I know my experience of it is being shaped by my history, even more because the player character is a kind of cipher with no real spatial storytelling to indicate much substance about her relationships to any of the other characters in the game" (147). Significantly, in both *Gone Home* and *Edith Finch*, these other characters are also, literally, absent, metonymized by the objects they leave behind.

Identity

Both games consistently emphasize the extent to which individual identity is constructed through its relationship to other, "external" identities. Primarily, this is executed through the interactions with family members' possessions, as well as items (in particular postcards) created by the player-character. In *Gone Home*, the player character's presence in the game world is minimal--every room and hidden corner of the house is populated with objects except for the guest room "made up" for Katie, the player character's, return. The guest room is ghostly and barren, showing none of the presence embodied in, for example, Sam's bedroom. In the absence of a *self* with which to identify, the reader-player explores the lives of others, and learns about their identities,

both external (what is hung on a wall or displayed on a bookshelf) and internal (the private letters stuffed to the back of a desk drawer).

It may be argued that the “absent self” as player-character opens a space for the reader-player to insert themselves cleanly into the game narrative--and indeed, this seems to be the upshot of the quote from Kopas above. However, I will contend that while most video games rest upon the premise of easy identification between reader-player and player-character, this identification is typically accomplished in one of three ways: 1) A third-person articulation in which the player-character comes prefabricated, and the reader-player is fully aware of the character with which they must identify; 2) A third-person articulation in which the player-character is constructed, through a set number of given options, by the reader-player, and thus is more easily identifiable as a “self” with which the reader-player may easily empathize⁴; or 3) A first-person articulation with an absent player-character in a game of *progression*, for example, a first-person shooter. In the third case, I would argue, there is no necessary incentive or call for the reader-player to grapple with questions of identity. By “necessary” I mean that this incentive is not built into the game structure itself--and though the reader-player may, of course, choose to examine such questions of identity (and of forced identification) in relation, for example, to the act of simulated killing, it does not emerge from the constructs of the game world.⁵

⁴ This is not to say that reader-players will always, or even often, create avatars which resemble themselves; rather, it is because the reader-player has produced the avatar that they will identify with it.

⁵ This idea is queered in games such as *Super Hot*, a first-person shooter which over the course of gameplay reveals that the player-character has an identity and has, to an extent, become trapped in the cycle

In the latter example, the use of a first-person perspective is not innately challenging to the reader-player's identity, as it is assumed that they will interact with the game *as themselves*, an identity state that is perceived as static/fixed. Despite the apparent easy convergence of reader-player and player-character afforded by first-person games, the fact that reader-player and player-character are articulated together is, by design, an act of estrangement. Queer hypermedia utilizes this estrangement by bringing it to the forefront of the reader-player's awareness. The reader-player is asked to identify with an unknown, or shifting, self--the fragmented self at the heart of the postmodern discourse of identity--and to produce that self continually within the game. As the reader-player controls their exploration through the house in *Gone Home*, they know that they are playing as "Katie," but there is little to direct their self-production save for the objects left behind by others. In *Edith Finch*, the player-character is similarly unknown, but the reader-player's progression through the game is defined by their adoption and performance of the identities of others.

The reader-player who engages with queer hypermedia is asked by the text to constantly inhabit spaces of ambiguity, discovery, and performance. Judith Butler writes in *Gender Trouble* that "gender proves to be performance--that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a *doing*, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed" (25, emphasis added). This

of killing which the reader-player enacts in each level. A game such as this, I would argue, can only successfully subvert the first-person shooter genre because reader-players enter the game world with the expectation that certain tropes--in particular, an absent, "self-insert" player-character--will be fulfilled.

sentiment has come to be a foundational precept of queer theory--that gender identity is not part of an essential "self," but rather the product of iterative performance over time, informed by contemporary models as well as historical precedent. This has been argued to be true not only of gender, but of most if not all identities. It has long been acknowledged in the field of video game studies that the performance of a player-character represents a temporary taking-on of a particular identity. Michael C. Zalot, in his analysis of video game narratives, writes, "The player *performs the game* in a similar manner with each new, repetitive playthrough... The discourse of this performance asks for immersion into the game, much like theatrical acting" (300, emphasis in text). The distinction in queer hypermedia is that the necessary estrangement between reader-player and player-character is foregrounded by the game's textual structures: in *Gone Home*, the absence of Katie as a defined character except through her relationships to the objects of others; in *Edith Finch*, the first-person switching between multiple characters (as well as ambiguity about the original player-character's identity). The effect is one of heightened performativity, of selves made strange, and it asks that the reader-player become conscious of their embodied identity in the game world.

An illustrative example comes early on in *Edith Finch*, when the reader-player explores the bedroom of ten-year-old Molly Finch and finds the diary describing an embellished version of her death. As soon as the reader-player picks up the diary, they assume the first-person perspective of Molly Finch, transported back to the night of her death from eating poison holly berries. Molly describes that she was sent to bed hungry and awoke feeling ravenous, proceeding to eat a variety of substances in her bedroom--

first the food from her pet gerbil's cage, then some toothpaste, and finally the holly berries. After the reader-player consumes the berries, Molly's narrative becomes fantastical and she journeys out through her bedroom window, becoming a cat in order to follow a bird through the branches of a tree. Over the course of experiencing the night from Molly's perspective (performing actions as her diary is narrated in voice-over) the reader-player is transformed into a variety of non-human animals--a cat, an owl, and a shark--in order to consume a variety of other animals. Finally, the reader-player assumes the perspective of a monstrous creature, which appears to them in the form of a single thick, dark tentacle that they can control in order to locate and ultimately eat the captain of a ship, ending the sequence.

There is a pervasive sense of estrangement within this identity play--most especially because the reader-player takes on each role in an order that moves from an animal with which most are intimately familiar, i.e. a cat, to a monster that is never identified except by its hunger and (dis)embodied tentacle. What does this uniquely queer sequence tell us about identity in the game world? In order to empathize with the plight of Molly Finch, the reader-player must become not only her, but the selves of her fantasies and nightmares, and must discard judgements pertaining to linearity or the ambiguity of identity since the sequence begins immediately and is fully interactive, thus requiring that the reader-player accept the conditions of radical transformation relatively quickly. The reader-player must therefore become accustomed to inhabiting a new physicality, interacting with objects in a wholly new way--something which is fairly uncommon in a medium which typically offers static identities. By creating an

environment in which the physical identity of the reader-player within the game is constantly shifting, *Edith Finch* highlights the inherent strangeness of adopting the (virtual) bodies of others that goes unacknowledged in other games.

Is All Hypermedia Queer?

As much as the specific structures employed by *Gone Home* and *Edith Finch* generate queer readings, there is a level at which structures pervasive in all hypermedia, when compared with codexed literature, engages the fundamental elements of queer theory. By making the reader-player a direct participant in the production of a narrative, hypermedia brings the body of the player into conversation with an otherwise static and unembodied text. All hypermedia, in this sense, catalyzes queer theory, creating sites of transformation in which actions made by readers may produce both a variety of outcomes and a variety of identities. We should not lose sight of the extent to which this identity-formation takes place through a reader-player's interaction with a machine: "The direct address to the player as the character reflects the immersive and subjective nature of the performative discourse; it also attempts to bring players out of a parasocial *person versus machine* narrative" (Zalot 300, emphasis in text). The reader-player navigates a world via a machine, and in the moment of action does not perceive themselves as separate from the machine, an orientation (of separateness) which is usually assumed in everyday machine-human interactions.

In making decisions for a player-character, the reader-player not only interfaces directly with the machine, but assumes/develops/re-structures an identity which is

contingent on the machine's game world. Thus hypermedia could be said to bring to fruition something akin to Donna Haraway's conception of the queer relationship between "humanity" and "technology" as one in which bodily and identity boundaries prove to be illusory:

Chief among these troubling dualisms [of "Western" traditions] are self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, make/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man... High-tech culture challenges these dualisms in intriguing ways. It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. (178)

Hypermedia in which the reader-player either assumes a first-person identity as a player-character or is addressed in the second-person (a popular trope in hypertext narratives) yokes together the human with the machine and thus, through structural devices, creates a new, contingent, and decidedly queer identity.

These identities are generated through interactions within virtual worlds, but I believe that they may signal something about how identity is constructed in "reality" as well. In each moment, we find ourselves surrounded by objects and people to which we must orient ourselves, within a world that allows for a relatively unrestrained access to objects. When literal or metaphorical paths open up before us, it is because we have made the choices that would lead us to those paths, have interacted with the objects and people that would allow us to interpret and understand those paths as meaningful. I alluded earlier to the deeper irony of what I am calling "queer hypermedia," which is that its

queerness is precisely its approximation of reality. I do not think it is a mistake to identify this connection. Sara Ahmed notes that “the work of inhabiting space involves a dynamic negotiation between what is familiar and unfamiliar” (7). Queer hypermedia brings this negotiation into our awareness by presenting a world which is, on its face, familiar and asking us to participate within it in ways we may be unaccustomed to.

DISCUSSION

In a recent call for papers for a special issue of *Literacy and Composition Studies*, subtitled “Queer and Trans* Embodied Literacies,” the writers of the call raise the subject of queer people inhabiting digital spaces. “As queer people,” they say, “we often turn to online worlds to find ‘people like us’--to know that we belong. We seek out the embodied performativity that may be outside our grasps” (Glascott). This identification of the queer with the digital speaks, in my mind, not only to a conception of the digital as a networked space in which people may seek out like-minded, like-oriented others (though it is undoubtedly this), but as a space that is necessarily conducive to the *work* of queer studies. That is to say, digital modes of production seem to offer the most readily available tools by which to create art that is *doing* queer. In the above sections, I have explored a few salient elements of what I have identified as “queer” hypermedia--specifically, I have examined some of the various ways that two queer texts in particular trouble the relationship between the reader-player (the reader) and the player-character (the narrator). Ultimately, this work centers around the notion that through digital works, specifically hypermedia narratives, the queer theoretical concept of *embodiment* can be realized by both writers and reader-players as well as closely studied by academics.

The exigence for this work is twofold. First, as video games are increasingly legitimized in the academy as sites of worthy study, hypermedia criticism is expanding along much the same trajectory as literary criticism, moving from a body of feminist texts

(centering largely around *hypertext* narratives) to a growing corpus of queer studies (centered around video games/*hypermedia*). The release of *Queer Game Studies* in 2017 and Bonnie Ruberg's *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* in March of this year seems to signal this shift toward an increasing interest in how digital storytelling can be made--or perhaps already is--queer. The interpretations afforded by a queer orientation to literature are undeniably rich, particularly in their attempts to dismantle the numerous binaries which a dominant orientation toward heterosexism has promulgated. Queer theory has always been a means of challenging such binaries directly, not merely by reversing them but by seeking to dissolve the very framework on which they rest. This is, at least in part, the abiding appeal of queer theory, and why I believe it will continue to prove itself relevant in critical discussions of identity--which is now understood to always be contingent.

Queer theory provides a way of understanding this contingency as a product of intersecting connections between the body and technology; identity in general is queered by the increasing presence of technology in human life, but the relationship between human and machine need not be presented as a binary relationship of dominance/subordination. Moreover, queer theory emphasizes the interpretive value of the body in a way that other theories perhaps do not, and, thus, as Sara Ahmed identifies, lends itself well to phenomenological adaptations. In a passage from the introduction to *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed describes a finding of queer-oriented phenomenology that resonates in game studies, that "what is 'present' or near to us is not casual: we do not acquire our orientations just because we find things here or there. Rather certain

objects are available to us because of lines that we have already taken” (21). Inside of a game world, the objects which accrue around a reader-player, which influence their decisions and identity-formation, have been brought to the reader-player’s attention through a network of other, previous actions that make such objects viable in the first place. Within the growing field of game studies, queer theory offers researchers means of exploring the intimate connections that are made between reader-players and the technologies with which they consistently, almost ubiquitously, interact. To study the actions and real-time interpretations of reader-players interfacing with a game world is to perhaps come closer to an understanding of a phenomenology of “reality.”

Second, queer theory, like critical theories of gender, race, and class, is intrinsically connected to the people it takes as its subjects. Queer theory at its best does not live in the ivory tower of academia, but is disseminated into a broader social consciousness and speaks to the issues of queer (and non-queer) people where they are. Digital platforms make queer texts increasingly accessible and also make us, as textual critics and consumers, conscious of the necessity for these texts to connect to and affect people’s ways of thinking and being in the world. The urgency of queer theory in this historical moment is elucidated in Stacey Waite’s “Queer Literacies Survival Guide”: “Somewhere in me is the theory that if we can teach our students queer imagination, if we can encourage them to cultivate queerer interpretations, if we can help them imagine other, queerer worlds, then perhaps more queer people will survive” (114). Video game texts, by virtue of both their popularity and their format, provide an ideal means through which to present and advance the queer literacies Waite describes. The bulk of this paper

has been devoted to describing some of the formal properties of such texts which lend themselves well to queer interpretations--and, by extension, the teaching of queer literacy. The popularity of these texts for creators, consumers, and critics of queer media has, however, gone relatively unstated in this paper except by implication.

Increasingly--from James Paul Gee's well-known enjoinder to professors of composition to incorporate video games into their pedagogy to the growth of game studies specialities at universities--video games are presented as texts worthy of serious study. In this sense, their trajectory in the academy has mirrored the path of film and "non-canonical" literature during the so-called cultural turn, and of graphic novels over the past twenty years or so. This increased academic validity stems, I believe, at least in part from the recent cultural dominance of the perception of video games not as a source of "disengaged" entertainment, but as a storytelling artform. This artform is similar to film in that it synthesizes writing and audio-visual design, but is distinct in its interactivity. Reader-players find themselves embodied in texts, of which they are simultaneously consumers and producers. They are aware of video game genre conventions and can identify where they are transgressed. It is my contention that hypermedia literacy (though not yet, to the same extent, queer hypermedia literacy) is becoming commonplace, as video games and pervasive technologies of the internet increasingly rely on interfacing via links and other modes of non-linear narrative conveyance.

I believe it is within this popularity--of hypermedia in general, and video games in particular--that we might locate the beginnings of what Waite identifies as necessity in

the quote above: namely, spaces in which to foster the ability to read from queer perspectives. This does not mean only to adopt lenses of analysis informed by queer theory, though this is significant, but rather to allow for the ambiguity of a narrative to be realized in the process of reading/playing, to be accepting of rather than resistant to the spaces that ambiguity opens up. This sort of literacy need not be reserved for academics, and, in fact, as the existence of the Queerness and Games Conference (QGCon) shows, contributions to understanding queer hypermedia literacy flow between video game developers, video game consumers, and queer theory scholars. What remains to be seen is how effectively an understanding of hypermedia's queer potential might be incorporated into a university or even secondary education pedagogy.

A thorough discussion of such a pedagogy is, of course, outside of the scope of this paper, but a perusal of the QGCon archives shows a growing engagement with the intersection of queer pedagogies and digital literacies. The 2017 QGCon, in particular, reflected especial attention to issues of educational spaces, demonstrated in the workshops “Supporting Queer Students as Game Makers & in Game Studies in the Age of Trump” organized by Rachel Burton, and “Videogame Pedagogy for Social Change” led by Irene Chen.⁶ From these efforts and others, we can see the cultural dominance of video games as it comes to signify for pedagogues concerned with social justice and liberatory theories. It is my hope that this momentum will continue and open up spaces

⁶ A list of all speakers and talks from the 2017 QGCon, can be found here: <https://qgcon.com/2017-speakers/>.

for more frequent, deep, and far-reaching dialogues about the potential for queer hypermedia theory in classrooms and beyond.

At the level of everyday video game literacy, players consistently adopt the stances of reader-players when performing “walkthroughs” or “playthroughs,” in which players narrate their experience of gameplay in real time. In earlier sections of this paper, I quoted from YouTube user theRadBrad’s *Gone Home* walkthrough, which I believe offers fantastic insight into the “moves” a reader-player makes when negotiating identity in an unfamiliar game environment. Throughout his playing of the game, theRadBrad articulates his experience, from initial confusion at the lack of game constraint to an understanding of how the game is being asked to be read: “You’re just supposed to explore this house; that’s the whole objective of the game.” Examining the ways in which video game playthroughs represent a kind of think-aloud protocol, and looking at how these protocols could be employed in the context of queer games, might prove valuable in attempts to define and develop queer literacies.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have focused primarily on the analysis of two walking simulators, reading them through both hypermedia and queer theories with the intention of charting a path toward merging these theories. It should be noted that, although I have chosen to analyze two games that employ multimedia elements (i.e. video games which utilize audiovisual as well as textual components), these are not the only pieces of hyperfiction to which scholars may apply a theory of queer hypermedia. In their introduction to *Queer Game Studies*, Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg note the rise of queer game designers using the open-source game software Twine to create text-based hyperfictions about the experience of queerness, queer identities and spaces. “Games in all of their manifestations,” the authors say, “are a powerful place to imagine a queer utopia, not simply by imagining a better world but by giving players/makers/scholars the *tools* for enacting new and better worlds” (x, emphasis added). Indeed, it seems that the relative democratization of the means of hypermedia production--primarily through Twine--has resulted in an outpouring of works by independent game developers whose stories would otherwise remain unknown. A search of the Interactive Fiction Database, which compiles text-based hyperfictions created using Twine, reveals 67 results for games tagged “queer”; a search of itch.io, a similar database which comprises independently created hypermedia games, turns up more than 900 games tagged “LGBT.” Any one of these hyperfictions, not to mention any of the sub-genres that have emerged within the larger

category of “queer games,” could be analyzed richly through a queer hypermedia framework.

Much of this work is already taking place at the hands of many of the scholars cited here, as well as many whose work I have not quoted from, whose dedication to theorizing queer hypermedia continues to press and expand the discourses of both video games and academia. To quote from Shaw and Ruberg again: “Queerness, at its heart, can be defined as the desire to live life otherwise, by questioning and living outside of normative boundaries” (x). I can see this sentiment nowhere better reflected than in hypermedia studies. From Vannevar Bush’s original theoretical system to the unprecedented expansion of hypertext into the everyday lives of human beings residing outside of academic research environments, hypermedia has always been about permeation, about boundaries and lines of demarcation made queer, made transgressible and editable. This philosophy is visible in the transformative works emerging from queer academe, as well as from independent content creators who are using tools like Twine and hosting platforms like the Internet Fiction Database to tell the lesser-told stories of living in queer bodies, identities, and spaces. I am hesitant to ascribe the same broadly utopian vision to hypermedia as those academic forebears who saw in machine writing the capacity “[t]o liberate us from the confinements of inadequate systems of classification” (Landow 8), and yet as I have followed this research and begun to conduct my own, I cannot help but hold out a fraction of that same hope.

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