Girlhood Games

Gender, Identity, and Coming of Age in Videogames

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Abstract

Teen girl characters have become increasingly centralised in popular contemporary videogames. This presence itself is noteworthy, for girl protagonists were once mostly confined to separate gendered games, although these contemporary heroines also frequently challenge ideological models of girlhood. In this thesis, I examine the feminist and transformative potential of a collection of videogames I categorise as "Girlhood Games."

I coin the term Girlhood Games to refer to games that feature adolescent girl protagonists with coming-of-age themes—primarily the negotiation of social and identity trials. To comprehend their transformative potential, I theorise Girlhood Games as liminal spaces, where their fictional worlds operate as safe spaces for girl players to perform and experiment with resistance and identity. In the Girlhood Games examined, genre and narrative traditions come into contact with interactive systems to rhetorically project practices of girlhood that challenge the status-quo. Girl players are thus exposed to—and invited to participate in—narratives of resilience and resistance in the game space.

To explore the argument, interdisciplinary theory is applied to close textual analysis of Girlhood Game case studies. Among these I discuss unstructured development in *Oxenfree* (Night School Studio, 2016), nostalgic resilience in *Life Is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015), animalistic transgression in *The Last of Us* series (Naughty Dog, 2013–2020), and techno-femininity and self-expression in *Secret Little Haven* (Hummingwarp Interactive, 2018) and *Lost Memories Dot Net* (Star Maid Games, 2017). These analyses follow a preliminary history of how girls in games have been represented within and outside of separate gendered industries to determine the representational foundation of Girlhood Games today. This thesis aims to introduce girlhood theory to videogames; to explore how ludic systems contribute to how we represent and make sense of girlhood. In effect, I offer a set of analytical tools to better understand both videogames and girlhood.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis contains no material without acknowledgement that has been accepted for any other degree or diploma, and to the best of my knowledge contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Stephanie Harkin

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This thesis was completed on the unceded land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations. I pay my respects to their elders, past and present, and extend my respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from all nations.

Always was, always will be, Aboriginal land.

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Parts of this thesis extend on ideas that I have published during this project. An earlier version of chapter two, with some conceptual ideas from my introduction, is present in the publication for *Game Studies* journal, "Liminal Rhetoric in Girlhood Games: Developmental Disruption in Night School Studios' *Oxenfree*."

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Introduction

Girl protagonists are centred in more and more contemporary videogames that are increasingly exploring girlhood and coming-of-age themes. Games about girlhood span several different genres and game styles, demonstrating a normalisation of teen girls' presence across the medium.[1] Examples include triple-A action adventure games like *The Last of Us* series (Naughty Dog, 2014–2020), *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017), *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017), and *Marvel's Avengers* (Crystal Dynamics, 2020); small studio exploration games like *Raji: An Ancient Epic* (Nodding Heads Games, 2020), *Mutazione* (Die Gute Fabrik, 2019), *If Found…* (Dreamfeel, 2002), *Oxenfree* (Night School Studio, 2016), *The Big Con* (Mighty Yell, 2021), *Jenny LeClue* (Mografi, 2019), and *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall, 2017); walking simulators like *Gone Home* (Fullbright Company, 2013) and *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017); episodic choice-driven games like *Life Is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015), *Life Is Strange: True Colors* (Deck Nine, 2021), and *The Walking Dead: Season 2* (Telltale Games, 2013); platformers like *Celeste* (Matt Makes Games/Maddy Makes Games, 2018), *Never Alone* (E-Line Media, 2014), *Child of Light* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2014), and *Indivisible* (Lab Zero Games, 2019); visual novels like *Boat Prom* (Hennessy, 2020), *We Know the Devil* (Worst Girl Games, 2015), and an enormous library of Japanese Otome games; driving games like *Lost Wage Rampage* (Jane Friedhoff, 2018); and RPGs like the *Atelier* series (Gust Co., 1997–2020), *Long Live the Queen* (Hanako Games, 2012), *Get in the Car, Loser!* (Love Conquers All Games, 2021), and *Ikenfell* (Happy Ray Games, 2020).

Videogames have a troubled reputation for character representations, fraught with hypermasculinity, hypersexualisation, exoticisation, white supremacy, damsels in distress, compulsory heterosexuality, and the secondary status, stereotyping or

[1] It is indeed a murky endeavour to apply traditional genre theory to videogames. David Clearwater (2011) rightly rejects the separation of thematic and aesthetic iconography to gameplay styles and different platforms, while pointing out debates among fans, journalists, and game scholars regarding the hierarchy of these categories. It is not my goal here to further these debates although I acknowledge their complexity when engaging with a surface understanding of genre merely to note that these contemporary games do not belong within a discrete and gendered categorisation.

invisibility of marginalised persons. Perhaps this is the reason that many studies interrogating girls in the media seem to avoid videogame analysis in way of film, television, literature, magazines, and comics (see Bellas, 2017; Cocca, 2016; Kaveney, 2006; McRobbie, 1991; Projansky, 2014). Academic and game developer Brenda Laurel, who founded the girls' games company Purple Moon, wrote in 2008:

> The good news is that girls and women now have a righteous presence in the world of games. The proactive news is that games that engage the social, cultural, and narrative proclivities of girls and women are still few and far between. (p. 20)

The videogames listed above, however, suggest that games valuing girls' experiences are no longer so few and far between. Moreover, many of those listed games venture beyond the simple visibility of girls. Several feature agentic heroines that effectively challenge the status-quo.

This project therefore draws attention to the videogame medium as a rich site for girlhood representations by looking at a collection of what I call "Girlhood Games" (the definition will be elaborated on later). Girlhood Games seem to reflect a new phase of representational valuation of girls; a valuation that Laurel observed to have not yet been realised in 2008 but that I identify to have gained traction in the following decade.

I question how girlhood is represented in contemporary videogames and draw attention to how the medium's ludic qualities extend prior understandings of represented girlhoods. The purpose of analysing games here (and not film, television, or other mediums) is to address the distinct integration of the player. I question how game systems produce new methods of communicating girlhood and identity, while speculating their transformative potential for imagined girl players. I particularly look toward case studies that feature heroines who unsettle the status-quo. In doing so, I follow Sarah Projansky's approach in their book *Spectacular Girls* (2014) which looks for and toward alternative versions of girlhood that lie outside of dominant representational patterns. Projansky (2014) reasons:

> To identify a dominant representation and then focus all one's analytical attention there—as much of girls' media studies scholarship does—is, at least in part, to reify that dominance. (p. 10)

Offering a similar perspective, Gray, Voorhees, and Vossen (2018) argue that, "by centering the women who make, play, and discourse about games, we decenter the presumed male subject of games" (p. 13). In this thesis, I likewise seek to position girls to the foreground of a historically-presumed masculine medium.

In making sense of the recent increase of teen girl heroines, I am introducing girlhood studies to videogaming. While videogames are beginning to be considered in relation to coming-of-age (or *Bildungsroman* and 'young adult') themes and formulas (Ensslin & Goorimoorthee, 2018; de Miranda, 2018; Reay, 2020a), specific attention to girlhood remains minimal, with the exception of Carolyn Cunningham's (2018) ethnographic study, *Games Girls Play: Contexts of Girls and Video Games*. Yet the growing centralisation of teen girl protagonists in games necessitates the medium's inclusion in girlhood studies. Considering player actions builds on rich and growing scholarship around representations of girlhood in cinema, television, literature, and increasingly comics.

The videogame format requires the player's active involvement when consuming a game. In *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames*, Brendan Keogh (2018, p. 2) points out that players are more likely to describe, "I am jumping" rather than "I am pressing the X button." So despite the border between the screen and the player, the avatar's actions nonetheless become enmeshed with the player's perception of their own. In other words, there is a sense that players themselves are *doing*. The *doing* is a crucial reason for videogames to be included in studies of girlhood representation. Videogame systems deploy distinct rhetorical devices, compounded by the player's actions.

Furthermore, the Girlhood Games discussed directly cultivate the players' resourcefulness, defiance, curiosity, and problem solving. As those traits are traditionally devalued in young women (see Short, 2007), the girl players' participation becomes an active performance of resistance. Crucially, this is an active process rather than one of malleable influence. As several commentaries have noted, girls are too often incorrectly presumed gullible to media influences (Bellas, 2017; Driscoll, 2002; Harris 2004). A videogame player, generally speaking, is what Melanie

Swalwell (2008) describes to be "a fully perceiving subject" who instead practices "a *partial* becoming" during play (p. 84). Girl players therefore do not confuse their sense of self and reality when interfacing with a game avatar.

The reality of how girls craft their identity is intricate and agentic. As Athena Bellas (2017) writes:

> Girlhood can be thought of as a field of contestations in which the limits of 'acceptable' feminine adolescence are constantly negotiated, challenged, redrawn, affirmed and destabilised by girls. […] The category 'girl' is a site of meanings negotiated by the regulatory and institutionalised norms as well as by girls themselves, who respond to and frequently contest these norms. (p. 11)

I likewise consider girlhood as a constructed identity that involves, as Bellas says, both systemic regulation and girls' own self-awareness. I therefore treat the videogames discussed in this thesis as one of many *resources* for girl players to interpretively draw upon when constructing their multidimensional identities (see Budgeon, 2011, p. 180). Thinking of Girlhood Games as resources is crucial for ensuring they are not framed as *telling* or *instructing*. Girlhood Games rather provide possibilities for girl players, who wield the capacity to consciously engage with and negotiate their meanings.

Each chapter of this thesis takes on one or more videogame case studies: *Oxenfree, Life Is Strange, The Last of Us* series (2013–2020), *Secret Little Haven* (Hummingwarp Interactive, 2018), and *Lost Memories Dot Net* (Star Maid Games, 2017). I unpack the way each game communicates girlhood experiences and consider their feminist affordances for girl players. I have deliberately selected videogames that vary in style, genre, and industry context, while they each also differ in their areas of social critique. The chapters do not represent a comprehensive overview of girlhood in videogames. They rather offer a set of analytical tools to begin to better understand both videogames and girlhood. The textual analyses allow me to explore my argument that Girlhood Games hold transformative potential. They also work to shift discussions around girls and games away from gendered marketing—"girls' games"—and instead towards girlhood as a developmental identity—"Girlhood Games."

Girlhood Games

Before the presence of teen girls became more normalised in videogames, girls were usually represented only in games that directly hailed girl players, belonging within a portion of the industry that was segmented by gender. Outside of videogames, it took Hollywood until the early 2000s to widely recognise the purchasing power of a feminine "tween"[2] and teen market (Tally, 2005).[3] Peggy Tally (2005) suggests that Hollywood's valuation of girl consumers came from the music industry, where young girls significantly contributed to the financial success of Britney Spears and *NSYNC. The music industry's recognition occurred alongside specialised television programming like the Disney Channel and Nickelodeon (Tally, 2005) before Hollywood followed suit.

Prior to this though, the videogame industry was already attempting to attract young girls to the medium since the mid-1990s in what is remembered as a "girls' games movement." Girls' games were developed on the basis of exhaustive audience research. This led, however, to games that often reaffirmed feminine stereotypes, as Cassell and Jenkins (1998b) explain:

> It is no accident, for example, that girls *do* want their products shipped in pink or purple boxes [...] such desires are manufactured by the toy industry long before the researchers get a chance to talk with the girls and find out "what girls really want from a technology". It's difficult to carry out empirical research that doesn't result in children giving as answers what they think they're supposed to say. (p. 19)

Critics of the girls' games movement declared that it promoted gendered separatism, working only to further isolate girls from the medium. Amanda Ochsner (2015), for example, frames the concept of girls' games as "the inferior counterpart to so-called regular games" (p. 24). Of marketing in general, Driscoll (2002) points to the problematic targeting of "girl" as a fixed demographic, asserting that "[t]he idea of a girl market locating a specific demographic of girls is confounded by the difficulty of

[2] Tally (2009) defines "tween" as approximately between the ages of eight and fourteen (p. 313).

[3] Films cited include *Legally Blonde* (Luketic, 2001) and *The Princess Diaries*' (Marshall, 2001) (Tally, 2005; see also Lupold, 2014).

defining girls" (p. 268). Adrienne Shaw (2014) agrees that "this kind of targeting distances women from mainstream games" and adds that while "some girls might want these games, so might some boys [...] but the marking of games as *for* specific audiences has ideological power" (p. 170).

Suggestions at the time to overcome this disparity revolved around the transformation of mainstream game content and representation. Henry Jenkins (1998), for instance, called for games to allow "girls to do more than stitch doll clothes [...] and boys to do more than battle barbarian hordes" (p. 290). When female characters were incorporated into action games around the 1990s to early 2000s, however, the action heroines like Lara Croft, Metroid's Samus, and Buffy represented a limited form of "girl power" that was non-threatening and visually pleasurable to straight, male players, while also privileging white, thin bodies (King & Krzywinska, 2006, pp. 182–183). Chapter one expands upon the history of how girls have been represented in videogames, although I have introduced some of that history in this introductory chapter in order to distinguish "Girlhood Games" from "girls' games."

Contemporary Girlhood Games begin to address some of the critiques concerning girls' games. When I write "contemporary" I refer loosely to videogames that have been released after 2010. This is in response to a marked increase in teen girl protagonists since then, although I do not bind the concept of Girlhood Games to a time period. The first characteristic of Girlhood Games is that they are not necessarily marketed towards binary gendered demographics, but instead adhere to different preferences in game types (such as platformers or RPGs). Each of the texts have also met a degree of critical or financial success, reflecting their general cultural acceptance, a normalisation of teen girl visibility, and a "newer perception of gaming as fundamentally mainstream, artistic, and diverse" (Kagen, 2017, p. 275). *Gone Home*, for instance, is a non-violent 'walking simulator' game (see Carbo-Mascarell, 2016) that centres on a queer teen girl romance. In his discussion of its popular and critical success, Christopher A. Paul (2018) suggests that "the reception of the game encourages reflection about what actually constitutes a video game" (p. 170). As Adrienne Shaw (2014) has argued, identification with a videogame protagonist is not necessary to enjoy a game and, moreover, empathetic identification does not require shared markers of identity. Like *Gone Home,* the game texts discussed in this thesis all received fairly wide-spanning enthusiastic reception, attesting to Shaw's

contention. The texts therefore also reflect a growing dissolution of "boy games" and "girl games"—although these industry categories nonetheless prevail, particularly in mobile gaming (see Chess, 2017).

The second characteristic of Girlhood Games is based on their thematic content. Girlhood Games feature girl protagonists and adolescent or coming-of-age themes, meaning they address, in different ways, social and identity trials. "Girls" and "adolescence," however, are concepts that first also require explanation.

In taking on the social group "girl," it is crucial not to subscribe to the rigidity and violence that discursive, gendered definitions often produce. Judith Butler (1990) famously presents a persuasive argument for the performative workings of gender, where subjects internalise how they are culturally constituted. Within feminist games studies today, gender dualisms are also rightly rejected. Shira Chess (2020, p. 25) troubles the refrain "playing like a girl" not only for its devaluation of the feminine, but for its failure to recognise non-binary, transgender, intersex, and genderqueer identities. My goal here, however, is to address those who *do* identify with "girl" and to treat this identity marker as valid without reinforcing binary, biological imperatives. I therefore approach "girl" as a fluid subject position, privileging flexibility over singularity. I follow Shauna Pomerantz (2009), who argues for "retaining all the chaos and ambivalence" (p. 155) when approaching definitions of girlhood. Like Pomerantz (2009), I acknowledge that "disciplinary definitions of the 'girl' are both constructions (i.e. artificial classifications) and lived realities (i.e. real experiences) at the same time" (p. 149). So when referring to "girl characters" and "girl players," I mean any who self-identify as such, regardless of assigned sex, presentation, and age.

I therefore also take on a flexible framing of "adolescence" that is inclusive of pre-teen (or 'tween'), teen, and young adult age groups—although I acknowledge that there are vast bodies of research on each of these ambivalent distinctions; see, for instance, Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, (2005). In the context of those writing on young adult fiction, adolescence as a developmental stage has been understood as "unsettled, uncertain, and transitional" (Driscoll, 2011, p. 1), "frequently marked by ongoing uncertainty, marginalisation, trauma, and crisis" (Daley-Carey, 2018, p. 470), as an "intense, suspended moment […] between being a nobody and a somebody" (Martin, 1994, p. 68), where "notions of selfhood undergo rapid and radical transformation" (McCullum, 1999, p. 3), and where subjects "must learn their place in the power

structure" (Trites, 2000, p. x). These explanations all draw attention to themes of uncertainty and transition. They understand adolescence, as presented in fiction, to be a process that follows childhood and that circulates around identity formation. For this project, it is more useful to pair identity formation with youth in general than to an age bracket like the "-teen" years. Girlhood Games are therefore not defined by simply the presence of an adolescent girl, but by the integration of those formative, coming-of-age themes.

In large part due to these themes, I theorise Girlhood Games to hold transformative potential for girl players. As stated earlier, I do not assume that girls are the *only* players of Girlhood Games nor those intended to play. I imagine the feminist affordances for girl players in a generalist and speculative manner, meaning that girl players are not implied to be singularly grouped together and to share collective experiences from the games under analysis. I rather mean to offer suggestions for what girls may derive from play based on the observations from my textual analyses. I also do not wish to imply that Girlhood Games are feminist by default. I have selected case studies that feature defiant heroines rather to draw attention to representational improvements in videogames. A later section of this introductory chapter will elaborate on the lenses through which I imagine the games' transformative possibilities.

My concept of Girlhood Games builds on a small but growing area of interest in game studies. A notable contribution in this area is Cunningham's *Games Girls Play: Contexts of Girls and Videogames* (2018), which examines the role of videogames in girls' lives based on qualitative interviews and focus groups. Cunningham investigates gaming's possible role in relation to girls' prospective interest in STEM fields. There are also textual analysis studies that have considered gender and girlhood in coming-of-age games (Braithwaite, 2017, 2018; Butt & Dunne, 2019; Vist, 2015), while others consider adolescent development through the lens of queer temporalities (Knutson, 2018; Pelurson, 2019), or how adolescent development is communicated through videogames more broadly (de Miranda, 2018; Ensslin & Goorimoorthee, 2020).

Luis de Miranda (2018) explores the concept of adolescent development in *Life Is Strange* as an existentialist and philosophical simulator due to its gameplay mechanic to rewind time and make ethical decisions. Ensslin and Goorimoorthee (2020) similarly locate literary *Bildungsroman* themes within particular videogames

where mapped paths are representative of the ritual process of forming self-realisation during adolescence. Emma Reay (2020a, p. 3), on the other hand, notes that the videogame medium is culturally infantilised in a manner comparable to the dismissive perception of children's and young adult literature in opposition to "serious" and "adult" literature. Reay advocates for the integration of literary perspectives to textual analyses of videogames in order to locate the relationship between the literary and ludic and thus deepen critical understandings of how children's literary themes (such as ecocriticism, feminist young adult narratives, or broader ideologies of childhood) are constructed in videogames. Few of these works, however, offer in-depth attention to how girlhood is presented through videogames and what those representations might do for girl players. In this thesis, I integrate girlhood theory to videogames to make meaningful sense of girls' increasing visibility within a medium long associated with boyhood.

Videogames and Cultural Gatekeeping

In December 2018 an elite-level North American *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016) League team, "Second Wind," signed up a new team member: a teenage girl known only as "Ellie." Her social media profiles were new and her personal information, including her full name, were withheld. She was also not a live-streamer like most other e-sports contenders, which—accompanied with her fairly new status to the elite-level—meant that few *Overwatch* players knew who she was. Ellie's lack of streaming or available personal information is not unusual for an online female player, as gendered online harassment has been widely documented (Cote, 2017; deWinter & Kocurek, 2017; Fox & Tang, 2017; Griffiths & McLean, 2018). Nonetheless, the mystery of Ellie led many to doubt her authenticity as a legitimately skilled *Overwatch* player (Grayson, 2019). Many accused Ellie herself of being a fabrication and despite pressure to eventually live stream, sceptics were still convinced that it was a male player behind the façade, working with a female friend who spoke into the headset. The scepticism held towards Ellie's competency reflects the assumption that female fans or cultural participants are "fake geek girls" who are relentlessly pressured to prove that they belong (Scott, 2019). More troubling than these accusations, however, were the threats and harassment Ellie received online, including calls to "doxx" her, meaning the public

release of someone's personal information. A tweet from Ellie that simply read "sorry" signalled her withdrawal from Second Wind, who later made a statement condemning the online harassment (Tamburro, 2019).

In a baffling turn of events, it was revealed soon after that Ellie actually *was* the persona of a fake account created by a male *Overwatch* player known as "Punisher" (Tassi, 2019). Punisher claimed that he was conducting a social experiment, although he chose not to elaborate on its parameters. Social commentary in the weeks that followed speculated that there was in fact no experiment (Colp & D., 2019). In a podcast episode deconstructing the controversy, one of the hosts points out its broader revelations of misogyny in videogame culture:

> It sounds like whoever was behind that account was taking really great pleasure in the joke of being a guy pretending to be a woman to beat other guys because guys in competitive gaming think that that's funny. [...] They like to demoralise other guys and what's the best way to demoralise another guy? Is by pretending to be a woman and beating him at a competitive game because women can't beat guys so it's a funny joke [...] Men have been taunting each other with, like, you hit like a girl, you run like a girl, you throw like a girl since time immemorial. (Colp & D., 2019)

Following this course of speculation, it is worth adding that ageism would have also played a part, as teenage girls, perceived as infantile, not serious, frivolous, and excessive (see Driscoll, 2002; Scott, 2019) hold even less credibility within boyhood spaces like videogames. Regardless of Punisher's actual agenda, his actions shed light on the gaming community's hostility and mistrust towards young female players. His actions have also likely amplified the already existing negative scepticism toward future girl competitors. I retell these events because they attest to the medium's broader problems of exclusionary gatekeeping, specifically the contempt directed towards girls and young women.

Videogame culture has long functioned as an exclusionary masculine space. The medium emerged through military funding in university computer science labs: two institutions where women have faced greater cultural barriers of entrance (Dyer-Witherford & de Peuter, 2009). Judy Wajcman (1991) also suggests that girls were culturally discouraged from technological pursuits. She further suggests that boys'

held greater access to arcade spaces, having more afterschool freedom to wander and fewer domestic duties. Jenkins (1998) likewise views videogames as replicating the freedom of playful, spatial wandering, which did not typically characterise girls' free time.

Graeme Kirkpatrick (2013), however, attributes the formation of the "authentic" male gamer to the emergence of the term "gameplay" in 1980s UK gaming magazines. The term at the time referred to how a game's feeling of mastery is measured. Kirkpatrick elaborates on this point in his later book *The Formation of Gaming Culture* (2015), explaining that gameplay represented the sensational ecstasy of beating a game. It was hence the antithesis of narrative and visual evaluations, which became associated with feminine "frippery" (2015, p. 104; see also Paul, 2018). This period also saw fewer videogames produced but with greater financial investment (and hence heightened financial risk). There was a need to establish a defined target market, which became young white men (Kirkpatrick, 2015).

Videogame histories that perceive the medium as strictly a male space, however, have begun to be challenged—which I contribute to in chapter five. Feminist theoretical responses to the label "Gamer" have also surfaced over the last decade, with Adrienne Shaw's (2012) article "Do you identify as a gamer? Gender, race, sexuality, and gamer identity" being a pivotal study in what Mahli-Ann Rakkomkaew Butt (2022) terms the "post-Gamer turn" (see also Shaw, 2013; Vossen, 2018). Shaw's (2012; 2013) research highlights how "Gamer" as a market-driven category has produced a culture that is unwelcoming–and even hostile–to marginalised people, who in turn often do not identify with the label despite their playing habits. The post-Gamer turn, then, as Butt (2022) argues, "take[s] greater stock of how people play (or do not play) videogames in relation to their everyday lives regardless of who does or does not claim the so-called Gamer identity" (p. 61). The post-Gamer turn, however, also recognises the endurance of the "Gamer" identity. Indeed, contemporary videogame culture remains hostile to women and other marginalised people institutionally (Anthropy, 2012; deWinter & Kocurek, 2013; O'Brien, 2017), academically (Phillips, 2020; Vossen, 2018), and within fandoms (Golding & van Deventer, 2016; Quinn, 2017), which reached a frightening peak in 2014's "GamerGate" campaigns. This was when women critical of videogame representation

and toxic gaming cultures received violent and sexual verbal abuse, threats, and harassment, and were also often doxxed.

Adrienne Shaw (2014) suggests that the stakes are higher for videogame inclusivity than other media forms.[4] Suzanne Scott (2019, p. 20) likewise associates videogame harassment campaigns as "unquestioningly the most visible and violent manifestations of the sort of gender bias against female fans." A suggestion for this is the fragility of gaming as a masculine identity because of its separation from traditional masculine virtues like physical strength and athletic aptitude (Cross, 2017; Vanderhoef, 2013; Wajcman, 1991). Those critical of videogames therefore threaten the spaces of self-victimised computer and gaming "nerds." Hostilities in gaming culture represent an intensified version of toxic fandoms more broadly, where fans from dominant identities fear that their inclusive hailing has become compromised in the wake of diverse fan visibility that has grown out of convergence culture (Scott, 2019). The hostilities therefore also reflect Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2018) suggestion that "popular feminism" simultaneously produces "popular misogyny" (concepts that will expanded upon in the following section).

The Ellie controversy shows that there are still strident barriers of entry to gaming. Male videogame fans further assert definitions of "real" games as well, dismissing casual games and walking simulators as lesser than more traditional action adventure or competitive games, while harassing journalists who review them favourably (Cross, 2017; Kagen, 2017; Paul, 2018). Large sectors of the videogame industry have been increasingly distancing themselves from gaming's toxic culture though, likely leading to a game like *Gone Home* receiving several nominations for game of the year, or Sony opening their 2018 E3 press conference with an enormous projection of a kiss between two girls when advertising *The Last of Us Part 2* (Naughty Dog, 2020).

The growing increase of Girlhood Games also reflects similar cultural and industrial shifts. They have proliferated around a time when sectors of the games industry are attempting to rewrite the masculine narrative of videogames (be it in the interest of social or financial gain). At the same time, Girlhood Games also represent

[4] There has since been a similar harassment campaign targeting workers within the comic book industry that dubbed its movement with a similar title to indicate the prior videogame movement's influence. At its time, however, the planned and targeted harassment campaigns in the realm of videogames were unique in that there were no comparisons to the same extent within film and television communities.

a broader transformation of videogames becoming "normal" mainstream entertainment for everyone.

Post- and Popular Feminist Contexts

The girl protagonists that I analyse in this thesis are limited to a Western, mostly North American, context of twenty-first century girlhood. They in turn tend to represent late-modernity's postfeminist girl subject. The mainstreaming of girlhood in games, however, also falls within the distinct but interrelated context of what Banet-Weiser (2018) terms "popular feminism."

It is crucial to first be reminded that girlhood is a discursive construction, and that girl culture has transformed around various meanings and ideologies throughout different national contexts. Catherine Driscoll (2002) traces the emergence of Western girl culture and even the category "adolescent girl" to institutionalised reforms in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Among the reforms were expansions to girls' education, age of consent laws, and labour laws, which influenced discourses on the phase between childhood and adulthood (Driscoll, 2002, p. 38). Propelled by these legislative changes, books, magazines, advice columns, and guidance manuals began regulating girls' behaviour and appearance, establishing a girl culture that spoke to literate middle-class girls (Driscoll, 2008, p. 16).[5] Measures to regulate femininity and girl culture through its cultural commodification and its promotion of approved consumption practices inflated in the late 1980s and 1990s and still persists strongly in the twenty-first century (Harris, 2004; Marshall, 2009; McRobbie, 2009).

Postfeminism was initially interpreted as celebrating the "end" of feminism in the late twentieth-century, where women had presumably achieved the power to enjoy the freedoms met by first and second-wave feminist movements (Faludi, 1992; see also McRobbie, 2009).[6] While the "backlash" discourse is mostly attributed to Susan Faludi's (1992) influential work in the 1990s, writers in the previous decade were also regarding post-feminism to be a "subtler name" for "sexism" (Overholser, 1986, p. 34).

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[5] Among these, Driscoll cites *The Girl's Own Paper* published by the Religious Tract Society from 1880. Today, lifestyle advice for girls is distributed in magazines like *Total Girl* and *GirlsLife*.

[6] Postfeminism, however, has in fact been traced back as early as 1919 when a group of women in Greenwich Village presented themselves as "post-feminists" advocating for the interests of "people… not in men and women" (Greene, 1991, p. 299).

Writing also in the 1980s, Judith Stacey (1992/1987) responded to Overholser's article in her own aptly-titled study "Sexism by a Subtler Name?: Postindustrial Conditions and Postfeminist Consciousness in the Silicon Valley," where she deployed the term not to indicate antifeminism or the end of feminism, but to point to the "simultaneous incorporation, revision, and depoliticization" of its "central goals" (p. 323). "Feminism," in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, had become an undesirable term, associated with uptight and old-fashioned "killjoys" (Ahmed, 2010; Gill, 2011, p. 61; 2016, p. 618).

Despite Rosalind Gill (2011, p. 68) pointing out the continuation of systemic sexism (marked by her rallying, "It is time to get angry again"), the postfeminist subject—if they must engage in activism—is rather encouraged to practise a "palatable" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 21) feminism that is "decidedly not angry" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, 15). This version of activism involves self-regulation, consumer capitalism, makeovers, and individual choice (Gill, 2007). Meanwhile, there is the continued pressure to "have it all" by managing a successful career alongside reproductive and domestic duties, all while maintaining a desirable, slim figure (Gill, 2007). Postfeminism hence belongs to a neoliberal ideology that positions women accountable for their own success or failure, despite ongoing unequal opportunities (Brabon & Genz, 2009; Gill; 2007, Harris, 2004; Piepmeier, 2009). It is about women succeeding in a societal system without questioning or challenging that system. Scholars have also critiqued postfeminism's commodification of feminism through the shallow permeation of "girl power" into popular culture (Cocca, 2016; Newsom, 2004; Tally, 2005; Whelehan, 2005; Zeisler, 2016) and fashion (Banet-Weiser, 2018), which reflects a capitalist ideology that a woman's success is determined by her consumerist choices (Harris, 2004).

Anita Harris' (2004) influential work, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* calls out the way that girls were situated within a binary of empowered "can-do" girls—ambitious capitalist citizens with non-threatening identities—and "at-risk" girls—victims and failures, held responsible for their poor choices. I follow Projansky (2014) in choosing "to seek out girls who do not simply perpetuate a can-do/at-risk dialectic" (p. 9). I particularly explore resistance to such discourses in chapter three through the heroines of *Life Is Strange*, which engages with postfeminism and neoliberalism's impacts on adolescent girls.

Jess Butler (2013), meanwhile, notes a tendency for postfeminist media academics to continually interrogate texts that centre on white, middle-class, and heterosexual women, arguing that their claims for postfeminism's exclusion of women of colour is "overly simplistic" and "empirically unfounded" (p. 48). She goes on to provide an extensive list of television programs and music stars that challenge the coupling of postfeminism and whiteness—while noting the ways that they regulate women and girls of colour. Adding to this, Banet-Weiser (2018) and Rosalind Gill (2016) discuss the limited visibility of women of colour's political activism insofar as it does not disrupt the Western status-quo, citing the "I Am Malala" campaign, for example, as receiving support due to its reinstatement of a superior Western "rescue" narrative.

This is where postfeminism begins to intersect with "popular feminism," which is a more recent phenomenon exemplified by the #MeToo movement, the 2017 Women's March, and various celebrities proudly proclaiming feminist identities (Banet-Weiser, 2018). In contemporary mass culture, the term "feminism" is no longer so derided. That is, so long as feminist activism does not unsettle the status-quo too radically, as seen through the celebration of Malala Yousafzai in the West. Gill (2017), revisiting her 2011 call to "get angry again," points out that contemporary feminism has thus transitioned from undesirable to trendy. Gill (2016) also questions whether the popularisation of feminism marks a new era of "post-postfeminism," but concludes that postfeminist models nonetheless endure (p. 619). Gill (2017) and Banet-Weiser (2018) both note that feminist activism remains vital, because its popularity has ignited an equal excess of outspoken, or "popular" misogyny, with GamerGate being a clear example of intense, reactive hostility.

Girlhood Games are reflective of postfeminism. Their feminist messages are unveiled if searched for, yet their girl protagonists are mostly presented as already equal subjects. At the same time, the increased presence of girl protagonists in mainstream commercial games is also reflective of popular feminism. Many of the games that do plainly raise gendered issues tend to sanitise their politics or resist forms of societal critique that may be *too* radical (see Butt & Dunne, 2019). A number of the protagonists from the Girlhood Games listed earlier are white, cisgendered, and heroic; although others, particularly those from smaller studios, represent

perspectives outside of dominant identities, and who depart more defiantly from the status-quo. The case studies selected for analysis span across these representations.

Girlhood Games as Liminal Spaces

My analytical approach to Girlhood Games is centred on theorising their transformative potential. I engage with the concept of liminality as understood through anthropology, and in doing so, I frame Girlhood Games as liminal spaces. Thinking of Girlhood Games through liminal theory carves out a space to contemplate player experimentation, performance, and identity construction within a framework that accounts for developmental transition.

Ideas surrounding liminality and transition were brought forth initially by Arnold van Gennep (1909/1960). In his foundational text, *The Rites of Passage*, van Gennep records anthropological accounts of global indigenous ritual ceremonies. Observing various rituals of transition (from status progression to the change of seasons), van Gennep (1909/1960, p. 11) identifies a formulaic three-part pattern: the preliminal rites (separation), liminal rites (transition), and postliminal rites (reincorporation). Van Gennep's linear trajectory is useful in making sense of human development, where the preliminal stands in for a subject leaving childhood, the liminal being the transitory trials of adolescence, and the postliminal marking the acceptance into mature society. Applying the stages to human development represents an ideology that celebrates an individual's transition as temporary, and their maturation as conclusive and stable.

Discursive readings emerge when considering popular culture through an anthropological lens. This is because popular culture reflects (and reflects upon) society. As L. A. Alexander (2013, n.p.) contends, screen media expresses social organisation and values and is hence the "heir" of community rituals. Van Gennep's linear trajectory has been cemented in popular culture, as seen in formulas like the hero's monomyth (Campbell, 1949). The monomyth likewise foretells a stable beginning, middle, and end, which also carries over into *Bildungsroman* literary traditions and more recent coming-of-age screen media. Chapter two addresses how the Girlhood Game *Oxenfree* unsettles this linear ideology. The liminal stage is

especially of interest to my consideration of girlhood because the heroines under analysis all occupy an ambiguous "middled" stage of adolescent transition.

Building on van Gennep, anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) later draws particular attention to the liminal stage, unpacking its unbounded and exploratory possibilities. Conducting his own observations of community rituals, he views the liminal phase to "operate betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial" (1969, p. 95). By this he means that liminality functions as a threshold space that sits in isolation from the rule-bound establishments of normative society. In relation to adolescence then, this would be between the regulated spaces of childhood and adulthood. The liminal phase hence reflects uncertainty, suspension, ambiguity, and also freedom. Turner (1969) therefore adopts the term "anti-structure" to distinguish the phase from the "structured" characteristics of the preliminal and postliminal.

Turner's understanding of liminality has since been co-opted by feminist theorists. The liminal threshold is seen as a space for adolescent girls to resist patriarchal paradigms (see Bellas, 2017; Daley-Carey, 2018; Henesy, 2021; Waller, 2009). While occupying this neutral territory, gendered transgressions may take place and alternative identities may be explored. As Bellas (2017) writes:

> The liminal is a threshold at which hierarchies of the dominant order break down, so it is a promising concept for feminist appropriation. Because the liminal operates in the gaps or fissures, in the 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1977, 95), it is a site where conventional boundaries and hierarchies dissolve, giving way to an unsettling of the status quo. (p. 18)

Bellas' feminist perspective of liminality points to the freedom girl subjects attain while navigating the less regulated, or anti-structural, space between adult and child societies. Another means of comprehending this approach is to consider the common refrain, "It's just a phase," deployed to excuse girls' actions that are otherwise socially unacceptable as children or adults. Exploring Girlhood Games as liminal spaces and applying a feminist lens helps to unveil their empowering potential.

Other studies on coming-of-age texts have adapted Turner's observations to girlhood representation. These works have examined liminal girls in young adult literature (Bright & Wills, 2011; Daley-Carey, 2018) and in various films and television

programs (Bellas, 2017; Henesy, 2021). This thesis owes a particular debt to Bellas' *Fairy Tales on the Teen Screen: Rituals of Girlhood* (2017), for this book length study provides significant groundwork in the merging of liminality and girlhood. My own consideration of videogames builds upon these analyses through is integration of play systems and player actions.

Turner's work has also been previously engaged with in game studies, though not in terms of girlhood (Dippel & Fizek, 2020; Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Ford Morie et al., 2007; Harvey, 2006; Molesworth & Denegri-Knott, 2007; Turkle, 1995). Turner's approach to liminality shares themes with the "magic circle" and so it is not surprising to see his observations adapted in game studies. The magic circle comes from Johan Huizinga (1938/1980), who briefly uses the phrase to describe broader processes of play that may be located in various realms of culture, long before the advent of videogames. Game studies (see Salen & Zimmerman, 2003) have since adopted Huizinga's passing phrase, developing it into a theory to explain play as stepping into a discrete "circle" or arena. This arena functions with its own set of rules that are separate from what Huizinga describes to be the "ordinary world" (1938/1980, p. 10). Roger Caillois (1958/2001) is another prominent play theorist known for his classifications of play (including distinctions between gambling, competition, and role-playing) but echoes Huizinga's emphasis on play as a spatially detached structure:

> In effect, play is essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life, and generally is engaged in with precise limits of time and place. There is place for play: as needs dictate, the space for hopscotch, the board for checkers or chess, the stadium, the racetrack, the list, the ring, the stage, the arena, etc. Nothing that takes place outside this ideal frontier is relevant. […] In every case, the game's domain is therefore a restricted, closed, protected universe: a pure space. (pp. 6–7)

In 2003, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman introduced the magic circle to videogames, describing digital games as "possibility spaces." They perceived a successful design to be one that fosters player's agency to explore and enact numerous possibilities. The medium's interactive nature continued to inspire several theorisations of the game space's exploratory and agentic possibilities upon the player's personal reality. Among these are formal perspectives like Nitsche, who likens learning a game's rules to a

theatrical "rehearsal process" (2008, p. 217). Cultural perspectives, meanwhile, view the game space as an emotional "arena" for the "practice of tension and relief" (Mortensen & Jørgensen, 2020), as "existential simulators" (de Miranda, 2018), or even the potential to be "life simulators" (Ensslin & Goorimoorthee, 2020).

Players, broadly speaking, have also been understood as navigating both online and solitary game spaces as sites of expression and performance (Ford Morie et al., 2007; Sihvonen & Stenros, 2020). In their study of role-playing games, Tanja Sihvonen and Jaakko Stenros (2020) consider the player's on-screen avatar to be like a digital mirror. The character functions as "a procedural object that is being used as an experimental and performative tool by the player," resembling pretend play with toys (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2020, n.p.). The reflective outcomes, however, are relative to the player's "*role-playing attitude*" (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2020, n.p., emphasis in original; see also Suits, 1978). Laurel (1993) prefigures the language from these works when she describes her company Purple Moon's *Rockett* series—from the 1990s "girls' games" movement— as crafting an "emotional rehearsal space for [girls'] social development" (p. 83).

Each of these conceptions of game space apply a paradoxical application of the magic circle (Huizinga, 1938/1980). The paradox lies with the theorisation of games as both a safe arena for inconsequential experimentation, while at the same time impacting the player's real-life convictions, empathy, or sense of self. To be sure, the magic circle's legitimacy has been disputed (Consalvo, 2009; Crawford, 2015; Pargman & Jakobsson, 2008; Pearce, 2006). Yet I embrace its paradoxical application in order to comprehend the formative potential of game space within a context of girlhood. The "unreal" Girlhood Game spaces have the potential to incite critical reflection upon a player's social reality. These spaces are grounds for girl players to experiment, try on, practice, and perform different expressions of girlhood identity, actively engaging with narratives of resistance through the perspective of non-conforming heroines.

Media in general can certainly provoke self-reflection, but I'm interested in how games specifically elicit this for girl players. Game spaces, particularly single-player games, are relatively free from real world regulation. They offer girls more freedom to practice various actions and identities. Mary K. Bentley (1999) argues that avenues are needed "outside of the traditional spaces where girls interact with the larger culture,"

where they can "try new identities without self-censoring" (pp. 219–220). Bentley's words resonate with Shira Chess' (2020) consideration of videogames as "agentic training tools" because they offer a space for marginalised people to enact agency. "Player agency—or the ability for a player to 'do'" Cole and Barker (2021, p. 8) write, "allows players to be the cause" of the narrative's "cause-and-effect." As Chess (2020) elaborates, "play has power, and in helming that power, feminisms can find new strategies for overcoming political and cultural oppression—not only for women, but for all underrepresented populations" (p. 7). Following Chess' notion that the "playful is political" (2017, p. 176), I argue that Girlhood Games provide liminal spaces for girl players to cause, act, perform, experiment, and transgress; made possible through the games' agentic input systems and relative separation from reality.

Framing Girlhood Games as liminal spaces is not an attempt to reimagine collective discourses surrounding game space. Understanding the game space as a threshold is useful to this thesis because of its applicability to adolescence and adaptability to feminist interpretation, befitting a suitable framework to understand the specific transformative potential of Girlhood Games.

Representation and Power

I also consider representation in Girlhood Games. Thinking of the games as liminal spaces accounts for the players' actions, while a representational analysis unpacks the characters and themes that players engage with and are exposed to.

Representation is a technology that communicates possible subjectivities. Representation also assigns meaning to subjectivities, including complex and varied meanings, or ones that are stereotypical and rigid. In this thesis, I deploy the term 'representation' to refer to how individuals and social groups are portrayed within cultural materials, specifically videogames. Diane Carr (2019) writes that representational studies,

> [share] certain tendencies, including an interest in centrality and marginality, normalized inequalities, privilege, and the "othering" of particular social groups, all of which are considered significant because popular texts reflect the cultures they emerge from. (p. 708)

Representation is used as a political device to promote ideological power, but it can also be utilised to disrupt and undermine those powers. One of the aims of this thesis is to draw on instances of the latter in order to consider the productive possibilities of Girlhood Games.

A substantial body of videogame scholarship has addressed troubling representation in games and their paratextual materials. Studies have performed quantitative analyses on the visibility of marginalised characters and their aesthetic designs, like clothing (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Burgess et al., 2007; Fisher, 2015), others have identified how the ideal 'gamer' is positioned in games and game magazines (Cote, 2018; Kirkpatrick, 2015), while others apply feminist theory to textual analysis (Trépanier-Jobin & Bonenfant, 2017). There has also been an increase of intersectional analysis (see Crenshaw, 1991) to videogame representation. The presence of queer theory, for example, is steadily increasing in videogame studies, as evident with recent publications like *Queerness in Play* (Adams et al., 2018), *Queer Game Theory* (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017), *Videogames Have Always Been Queer* (Ruberg, 2019), and *The Queer Games Avant-Garde* (Ruberg, 2020). Analyses on race and ability are also intersecting with feminist games theory within works like Kishonna L. Gray's *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (2020). These are important advancements in videogame scholarship, as Adrienne Shaw explains in a 2017 keynote speech:

> Despite being around for decades, game studies still has tons of space to grow. I do think that we need more (just fundamentally more) writing about race, class, religion, disability, nationality, non-binary gender, and masculinity in games. There are so many other axes of identity that we could be exploring as well as the intersections of these subject positions. There are entire areas of the world that are underrepresented in game studies. I'd like to see more and better games history. (n.p.)

Videogames have a troubled history of overrepresenting white and hypermasculine characters and intensely hypersexualised female characters in service of a presumed heterosexual male player-base, leading scholars to caution against the harmful consequences to players' self-image and sense of self-worth (Hemovich, 2018; Jansz & Martis, 2007). Shaw (2014) meanwhile, complicates the provocation that character

identification is required to enjoy a videogame. Through qualitative interviews, Shaw finds that for many players, representation is *not* always important, and that pleasure can certainly be derived from games that do not represent the player's identity. She (2014) suggests that her interviewees' sentiment of representation being "nice when it happens" potentially speaks to a power dynamic that normalises their marginalisation.[7] Shaw also finds, however, that degrees of character identification vary by game type and context, trivialising the notion that identification is needed to enjoy a game. Shaw's study is influential in complicating the "market logic" argument that an assumed majority of white, heterosexual men prefer to play as characters that reflect their identity (Shaw, 2014).

Graeme Kirkpatrick (2011) also began to address this idea in his earlier work, where he writes that a player's relationship to their avatar is one of "casual propensities (things it can do and that can be done to it) and limitations" and not as "an extension of [the player] in any meaningful or emotionally significant sense" (p. 180). In other words, if relating to a character or seeing oneself presented is not always important, "then what logic remains for the majority of characters being normative along the axes of race, gender, sexuality, age, etc.?" (Shaw, 2014, p. 44). Representation is therefore not an issue strictly grounded by individual pleasure and market logic, but it is nevertheless an imperative technology for broader political and social relations, validation, and imagining possibilities (Shaw, 2014).

Media representation is important because it portrays possible subjectivities. Influenced by Michel Foucault's discursive formations (1969/2002), Stuart Hall (1997) proposes a constructivist approach to reading media representation that accounts for historical and political context. This approach examines not just the semiotic tools that communicate meaning but also acknowledges the powers that regulate our means of interpretation. For Hall (1996), "identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation" (p. 4), meaning that fictional representations enact very real effects upon an audience or players' sense of subjectivity.

[7] Shaw cites this power dynamic as "Gramscian," referring to Antonio Gramsci's (1929–1935/1971) work on hegemonic discourse. Gramsci suggests that dominant bodies of power leave marginalised individuals (or audiences) accepting of their powerlessness.

Building upon Hall's work, Richard Dyer (1993/2002) discusses how representation has a causal effect upon a group's social treatment. He argues that stereotypes serve the interests of those who control them and that they are implemented to make sense of society by categorising the Other (p. 12). Jack Halberstam (1998), meanwhile, cautions against the concept of the "positive image" believed to counter the stereotype. He advises that positive images are no less harmful or unrealistic than negative images, and that they "too often depend on thoroughly ideological conceptions of positive (white, middle-class, clean, law-abiding, monogamous, coupled, etc.)" (Halberstam, 1998, pp. 184–185). Shaw (2014) also warns that to evaluate a stereotype as positive or negative "implies both that the group is definable and that the group exists in the world in a singular way that is misrecognized" (p. 20). This thesis therefore does not evaluate its representations in positive/negative or accurate/inaccurate binaries, as to do so would imply a false presumption of girlhood as a monolithic identity. I rather contemplate the political affordances the games communicate, considering the traits and actions that players are exposed to. In doing so, I avoid a celebration of visibility alone.

Often, representations of marginalised persons operate under what Banet-Weiser (2018) terms an "economy of visibility." Economies of visibility position representation itself as the fundamentally progressive end rather than allowing room for political and social reflections to follow (Banet-Weiser, 2018, pp. 22–23). Moreover, to be merely visible does not exempt subjectivities from being policed as normative and non-threatening to the status-quo. It is also necessary to acknowledge, as Alison Waller (2009) reminds us, that representations of adolescence are "inevitably controlled by adult systems of communication" (p. 2), meaning that girlhood representations are rarely produced by girlhood subjects. Chapter five, however, addresses the notion of self-representation and the marginal voices that emerge from the independent games industry.

Case Studies and Methodology

To discuss the liminal characteristics and representational meanings within Girlhood Games, interdisciplinary theory is applied to a textual analysis of selected case studies. To list the case studies once more, the videogames to be examined are *Oxenfree, Life*

Is Strange, The Last of Us series*, Secret Little Haven* and *Lost Memories Dot Net*. Each of these games feature a central, adolescent female protagonist (or co-protagonist as in the first instalment of *The Last of Us*) that must negotiate transitory social and identity tensions. The texts chosen are also each single player offline games, for these private spaces have the potential for more nuanced self-reflection (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2020). Each textual analysis demonstrates an approach to better understand both videogames and girlhood. The theories I draw from include feminist cultural theory like postfeminism and popular feminism, in addition to girlhood studies, videogame representational studies, fan studies, internet studies, literature and narrative theory, cinema and genre studies like horror theory, as well as and anthropology.

There is no universally accepted method for studying videogame texts, but rather a multiplicity of approaches that are appropriate for different research questions and aims. These include but are not limited to ethnographic player research on identification or agency (Cole & Gillies, 2021; Cunningham, 2018; Muriel & Crawford, 2020; Shaw, 2014); autoethnography for online gendered hailing, violence, and ideology (Borchard, 2015; Janish, 2018); large-scale content analysis of games for representational trends (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Reay, 2021); or content analysis of paratextual marketing materials (Burgess et al., 2007; Payne, 2012). Textual analysis is an appropriate methodology for this thesis, as in-depth readings of individual texts place my research question into practice—that is, how Girlhood Games hold transformative potential.

Treating videogames as "texts" helps to situate them as "cultural artefacts" that, through textual analysis, can be interpreted to hold different meanings and social impacts (Cole & Barker, 2021). In conducting a textual analysis, scholars writing after the narratology/ludology debacle suggest breaking a game down into components, variably termed "assemblages" (Taylor, 2009), "fragments" (Carr, 2019), or "grammars" (Krzywinska, 2015b). These components account for a holistic treatment of a videogame experience that acknowledges both the "textual"—narrative, aesthetics, sounds, cultural iconography—and the "mechanical"—algorithms, rules, actions. Without privileging one set of attributes over another when analysing a game's content, this approach also acknowledges that there are instances when one attribute will shift to the background of a player's consciousness. A player may become absorbed

in a game's narrative while viewing a cut scene, or a narrative may be momentarily overlooked during a more intensive action sequence (King & Krzywinska, 2006). The secondary, or "background" attributes, however, always remain present to some degree.

Acknowledging both textual and mechanical elements broaden how individual videogames may be studied and allows for more specific attention towards genre, philosophical, cultural, and gendered considerations (Krzywinska, 2015b, p. 56). These considerations come about through the application of critical cultural theory to various game components, an approach that loosely follows Diane Carr's (2019) recommendations in her article "Methodology, Representation, and Games." I write "loosely" as I do not intend to frame my textual analyses around the same five codes; action, enigma, semic, cultural symbolic; although Carr does state that these codes may be applied selectively. The elements examined for each of my case studies will vary according to their relevance for each game. A systematic approach is not useful for a group of case studies that vary in game type, so the approach must be modified to account for the specificities of each game. For the most part, I prioritise the player's experience over developer intentions. The elements to be analysed therefore include player movement, narrative choices and consequences, actions, obstacles, character/player perspectives, character design, spatial design, dialogue, and the presence of existing genre conventions like *Bildungsroman* or horror traditions.

Carr (2019), however, cautions that approaching a game through fragments risks emphasising a distinction between a game's "structural bits" and "textual bits" (p. 712). Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska's (2006) earlier work addresses this when they state that a game's contextual background and gameplay mechanics "also need to be put back together again" as "none operate in isolation" (p. 5). Conducting a sequence analysis for each game establishes how textual and mechanical components come together to communicate perspectives on girlhood. While Carr (2019) notes that sequences themselves represent an isolated and hence limiting fragment, comparable to a film still, I rather suggest that game sequences are precisely representative of the experience of playing a videogame. This is because the process of playing a videogame usually involves entering and exiting the text according to a player's availability, mental or physical capacity, and access to the game. Games are not necessarily

"completed" in one sitting, nor always completed at all, but rather often tend to be consumed in fragments.

Researcher as Analyst

The process of gathering a videogame's fragments for analysis involves first playing the game once without documentation or note taking. For most of my case studies, this step had already been completed prior to the beginning of my research (in other words, I have selected games that I had already played). The aim of this first playthrough is to establish and identify the organic or intended experience of playing the game for entertainment, rather than analysis.

The game would then be played again for as many times as necessary in order to take notes and to collect screenshots and short video recordings. Replaying the games also allows for exploration of different narrative pathways, dialogue options, and strategic play approaches, depending on the text's options. A limitation of this approach, however, is that play is transformed into an endeavour of collecting information. Carr (2019) reflects:

> Collecting fragments in the face of this variability halted play. Then, it halted analysis [...] I was attempting to capture something that emerges through play, through a process that had ceased to resemble play. (p. 715)

This seems to be an unavoidable outcome, however, in most studies of individual cultural objects, where fragments of a film or work of literature, for instance, are extracted and closely analysed in a process unlike "normal" practices of viewing or reading. Disengaging with conventional consumption practices are necessary for achieving accurate and in-depth textual analysis as long as the analyst is aware of how the product is conventionally intended to be consumed: thus, the purpose of the first playthrough of each text prior to analysis.

For this research, it was important that I myself played the games, as watching another person play compromises an understanding of the participatory function of the medium. Playing a game also involves making decisions or movements that exclude other possibilities. When analysing *Life Is Strange,* for example, another

player may not explore a girl character's bedroom as closely as a researcher examining representations of girlhood. Playing the game, however, positions the researcher as an agent in constructing the chronical of the videogame. Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) distinguishes interactive consumption from other media as "bottom-up" rather than "top-down" (p. 7). A player holds greater autonomy in piecing together a game's presentation of meanings and events. This also means that the play experience is subject to greater variation from one player to another, eliciting the potential for "wildly different conclusions" to be drawn (Atkins & Krzywinska, 2007, p. 4).

Barry Atkins and Tanya Krzywinska (2007), however, embrace and celebrate this potential, arguing that it "makes for a healthy and vibrant field of study" (p. 4). Ryan (2001) meanwhile acknowledges that the "bottom-up," or authorial positioning of a player potentially risks presenting the medium as a "magic elixir," cautioning that players are not quite fully autonomous within the confines of pre-scripted possibilities (p. 9). The player-researcher is therefore positioned to "read" even a game's algorithmic or mechanical elements, as these too operate "textually" via the constraints of their design (Atkins & Krzywinska, 2007, p. 6). When playing the game, the researcher therefore needs to practise reflexivity to examine an interactive medium, although this reflexivity is rather acknowledged than itself explored because this is not an autoethnographic or phenomenological study but a textual analysis of the games' play systems and representational qualities.

Chapter Organisation

I have organised this thesis into chapters that each take on a different case study and interpretive lens. Chapter one, however, first expands on the context of Girlhood Games. I conduct a history of how girls have been both represented in videogames and hailed as players. The legacies of girls' games and the casual games industry (which also targets girl players) that have carried over into Girlhood Games and other mainstream videogames are identified. I look at how these gendered industries are important sites in comprehending how Girlhood Games have come to be. In this contextual chapter, I also acknowledge that Girlhood Games are not a "new" phenomenon. There is hence also a discussion regarding areas of the industry that have developed games with girlhood themes outside of gendered target marketing,

namely the company Sierra On-Line in the 1980s and through the wave of licensed IP games in the early 2000s.

Chapter two is the first textual analysis of an individual game. I examine Night School Studio's *Oxenfree* to demonstrate how videogames fit into *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age narrative traditions. This is to highlight how adolescence in general can be communicated through videogames. I also engage with van Gennep's (1909/1960) and Turner's (1969) work on ritual transition to show how their anthropological observations are applicable to Girlhood Games. I argue that *Oxenfree* troubles linear ideologies of human development, as its heroine remains infinitely liminal through the game's supernatural temporalities. Notions of liminality are present in each of the following chapters, although its overt application to *Oxenfree* is intended to highlight its transformative workings.

Chapter three moves on from representations of adolescence to examine adolescent girlhood more precisely. A close analysis of Dontnod Entertainment's *Life Is Strange* exposes its critiques of neoliberal and postfeminist politics. I argue that the game's rewind mechanics demonstrate a version of nostalgia that accounts for girls' perspectives in the face of oppressive patriarchal realities confronted during adolescence. This form of nostalgia unsettles its usual function in traditional narratives of masculine adventure, away from the home. I theorise the game's rewind system and photography mechanics as a productive and resilient harnessing of nostalgia to overcome the game's patriarchal obstacles, demonstrating how feminist politics can be embedded into the ludic systems of Girlhood Games.

The fourth chapter carries on the thesis' engagement with narrative tradition by considering how fairy tales—so often centered on girl protagonists—are revisited and revised through the horror videogame series, *The Last of Us*. I consider the traditionally instructive intention of fairy tales within videogames, which more precisely guide and impart self-reflection through the player's actions. I discuss how the horror genre subverts fairy tales' patriarchal regulations upon young girls, locating updated themes of the tale Red Riding Hood within the game series. I read The Winter Chapter in the first game as allowing players to be the active slayer of the wolf when the character Ellie is hunted by a paedophile and cannibal. *The Last of Us Part II*, however, is even more transgressive, positioning players to take on a wolf-like and anti-heroic role through Ellie's violent quest for revenge. The series is considered

through feminist and queer horror theory. Like my reading of games as liminal spaces, these theories often perceive horror as safe and separate spaces rife with transgressive energy.

The fifth and final chapter closes with a consideration of how girls might represent *themselves* through videogames. I analyse two games with creative play components that feature teen protagonists as cultural producers: *Secret Little Haven* and *Lost Memories Dot Net*. These games reference girls' internet and fan cultures from the late 1990s and early 2000s, prompting a reconsideration of the overlooked history of girls' games culture from bedroom DIY spaces. This chapter also considers the independent games industry as a related avenue for self-representation, where the developers of both case studies drew from their own memories and experiences when making their games.

I conclude the thesis by revisiting the common themes that emerge throughout its chapters, like liminal temporality and struggles for authenticity. I reflect on the evolution of Girlhood Games since beginning my research and I identify avenues for future study.

1. Charting Girls in Games

I'd like to think that the girl games movement planted some of the seeds of change that are now beginning to bloom.
—Brenda Laurel (2008, p. 20)

Introduction

Although Girlhood Games are increasingly more visible, they did not emerge in a vacuum. Games with girl identity themes existed before contemporary gaming, and these precursors deserve deeper exploration. Where, when, and for whom were these games created? How have representations of girls functioned and been transformed? How has the industry's perspective on girls and girl players evolved? These are the questions that I pursue in this chapter, where I present a history that shows how earlier games have shaped contemporary Girlhood Games. A contextualisation of Girlhood Games is necessary before my close readings of selected case studies. The history of girls and games is rich, complex, and culturally undervalued, and it sets the stage for Girlhood Games today.

I employ terminology in this chapter that, while interconnected, requires clarification:

- *Girls in games* refers to the represented girls and young women in videogames of any time or genre. For example, eighth-grade middle schooler Rockett of Purple Moon's *Rockett* series (1997–1999) is a girl in a game.

- *Girls' games* are videogames that are created and marketed to girls. Often they feature a girl protagonist yet this is not always the case. Girls may also be addressed as players through themes or play styles considered appealing to girls (a point I will unpack later). Purple Moon's *Rockett* series was marketed "for girls" and is thus a girls' game, but so is a game like

Nintendogs (Nintendo, 2005). *Nintendogs* is not concerned with representing girls' experiences but is nonetheless designed with girl players in mind (Cote, 2020).

- *Girlhood Games*, as outlined in my introductory chapter, are games that feature girl protagonists who face coming-of-age social and identity trials. Girlhood games are not necessarily developed for girl players only. So, the *Rockett* series are Girlhood Games because players navigate Rockett's identity formation and middle-school social dilemmas. Triple-A action adventure games like *Horizon Zero Dawn* and *The Last of Us Part II* are also Girlhood Games. They are not interested in gendered marketing, but they likewise follow the trials of their late-adolescent girl protagonists.

The Rockett series' presence in all three of these categories shows that these terms are intricately connected. Games *for* girls and games *about* girls are thus far from inseparable, and in the first half of this chapter I unravel this relationship. At the same time, a delineation between games for girls and games about girls reflects how industrial perceptions of girl players have evolved.

The history of girls' games could alone comprise its own book-length account. It is not my intention here to record its every detail but rather to identify industrial patterns and transformations in game forms and representations of girls. I also identify early instances of Girlhood Games that were developed outside of gendered marketing. I thus establish here a more concise picture of my specific approach to Girlhood Games by situating them beyond girls' games. It is crucial to expand discussions of girls' games beyond their demographic stereotyping. As I rather characterise Girlhood Games through their representation of girls, I'm interested in analytically deconstructing the representations within girls' games to encourage alternative approaches of reading these games beyond their market intentions.

Girl players are incredibly influential to what Girlhood Games look like today. In this chapter, I elaborate on the alternative play systems found in games that emerged from market research into girls' purported preferences. Games for girls in the 1990s looked and played differently from existing popular games and often even distanced themselves from the label 'games' entirely. Multimedia titles began to

challenge what a game could be, while their story-driven and non-violent formats would eventually find their way to contemporary games. Importantly, many of them functioned as transformative spaces for girls' identity formation, a function that is essential to my understanding of Girlhood Games today.

Girls' games and casual games acknowledge the value of girl players, yet mainstream Girlhood Games today did not all necessarily descend from gendered market segmentation. The latter section of this chapter thus also locates the presence of girlhood themes in games that were not driven by gendered marketing, which, for concision, I term "gender-neutral" games. Many of these came from Sierra On-Line games and through licensing agreements that were occurring before and during the girls' games and casual movements. Representations of girls prior to the 1990s outside of CD-ROM software and casual platforms, or during the PlayStation 2's "golden age" (Swan, 2021) of licensed games, are indeed under-analysed avenues of exploring the presence of girlhood in games. In the previous chapter I referenced Henry Jenkins' 1998 call for games to "allow girls to do more than stitch doll clothes, mother nature, or heal their friends' hurts, and boys to do more than battle barbarian hordes" (p. 290). Many of the gender-neutral games explored later in this chapter come to represent varying articulations of his call.

From identifying girlhood themes across these various games, I offer two main observations. The first is that the changing perception of videogames from a niche boys' subculture to a ubiquitous form of entertainment has impacted industrial logics for gendered separatism. While the capabilities of CD-ROM multimedia helped to open up gaming to a broader base of players, the accessibility of casual games and the low-cost PlayStation 2, with its enormous catalogue of familiar licensed games—with proved success in other media—significantly contributed to videogaming's more mainstream popularisation. While girls' perspectives remain overwhelmingly underrepresented within game content, their increasing presence in popular, gender-neutral games today may be attributed to the medium's own increasingly mainstream status—as well as ongoing feminist criticism against the promotion of traditional and binary gender roles in visual media.

My second observation is in respect to play mechanics, namely the way that conventional rules and systems have been challenged and the role that gendered games have contributed to this. Without overvaluing their contribution—visual novels

and adventure games, for example, must not be overlooked—girls' games have helped redraw the boundaries of what constitutes a "real game" (see Consalvo & Paul, 2019). The derision and varying acceptance of girls' games has persisted to some contemporary Girlhood Games that are still tackling discredit and backlash.

This chapter is limited to larger industrial evolutions. I have chosen to defer a deep discussion of the indie industry's contributions to girlhood perspectives to chapter five, confining my history in this chapter to larger practices. My discussion in this chapter is also predominately confined to North American games, which is in line with my Western case studies in the remainder of the thesis. While I mention Japanese products here, further research could provide greater specificity into how Japanese companies have historically developed games for girls.

The structure of this chapter is unique to the thesis, as I do not conduct a close textual analysis of a single game but rather provide a history that is informed by a wide expanse of games—with the exception of a brief but comparatively deeper consideration of *Episode—Choose Your Story* (Pocket Gems, 2013). This preliminary history contextualises Girlhood Games today, allowing me to consider how earlier practices feed into the case studies analysed in the remaining chapters.

"Emotional Rehearsal" in Girls' Games and Multimedia

While one of my goals is to think beyond girls' games when considering the presence of girls in videogames, it is nonetheless crucial to acknowledge their influential legacy. The wave of girls' games in the 1990s is most often attributed to the startling success of Mattel's *Barbie Fashion* Designer, produced by Digital Domain in 1996 (Beato, 1997; Cassell & Jenkins, 1998b). *Barbie Fashion Designer*, however, was far from the first girls' game developed. In 1984, the game *Barbie* was released on Commodore 64 by A. Eddy Goldfarb & Associates, while the non-licensed girls' game *Hawaii High: Mystery of the Tiki* (Sanctuary Woods) was released in 1994 for Windows 3.x. *Barbie Fashion Designer*, however, was the first girls' game that was meaningfully profitable. The game sold more than 500,000 copies in its first two months (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 1998, p. 46) exposing the market potential of girl players.

Its success inspired the creation of studios that would be dedicated to the development of games for girls, igniting what would become known as the "girls'

games movement." The most prolific studios were Her Interactive and Purple Moon. These studios conducted extensive focus group research into the appeals and desires of girls to uncover what they would want to see and do in a videogame (Braithwaite, 2018; Glos &. Golden 1998a). In addition to claiming the potential financial benefits of girl consumers, the girls' games movement was also reportedly part of a larger societal attempt to encapsulate girls' interest in computers so that they would not be left behind from a future of growing computer-dependent careers (Jenkins, 1998), although the market potential was most likely the major driving factor.

Among the prominent games that emerged were the *Rockett* series (Purple Moon, 1997–1999), the *Secret Paths* series (Purple Moon, 1997–1999), *McKenzie & Co.* (Her Interactive, 1995), and *Nancy Drew: Secrets Can Kill* (Her Interactive, 1998), as well as "edutainment" releases like *Let's Talk About Me* (Girl Games, 1995) which features an assortment of mini-games designed to teach girls about puberty. Another developer frequently cited (Beato, 1997; Cassell & Jenkins, 1998a; Ochsner, 201) is artist Theresa Duncan, who developed the game *Chop Suey* (Magnet Interactive, 1995). *Chop Suey* notably did not involve focus group research but rather drew on Duncan's own interests and childhood memories (Glos & Golden, 1998c). While Duncan shares that she did not consciously design the game for girls (Glos & Golden, 1998c, p. 172), Magnet's packaging of *Chop Suey*, like all the games listed, clearly states its gendered market, reading "Girls 7–12" on the spine of its box. Each of these games was also released on CD-ROM, representing the way that domestic computing and multimedia technology aimed to reach a wide base of users.

I write multimedia in the subheading of this section because most of these games were categorised as such, avoiding the term "game" altogether in their trailers, box art, manuals, or websites. Of those listed above, only *McKenzie & Co.* frequently incorporates the terms "game" and "play" in its manual, although Her Interactive's mission statement is "to create a multimedia world for girls" (the statement continues to list games among other services). Players of *Chop Suey*, on the other hand, are invited into an "interactive daydream" while its manual directs players to the "Multimedia Titles" tab on Magnet's now-defunct website to learn more about the game's world and characters. *Barbie Fashion Designer*'s packaging meanwhile states "Software For Girls," while Purple Moon games are labelled "Friendship Adventures for Girls" on their boxes. *Let's Talk About Me*, despite being developed by a company

called Girl Games, rather declares itself an "Interactive Handbook." "CD-ROM" is also often used as a descriptor where "game" might otherwise have been employed, as seen underneath the title of *Barbie Fashion Designer* or on Purple Moon's online store, where buyers may browse "all our CD-ROMs."[1]

Commentators in the 1990s were also hesitant to describe many of these as games. For instance, writing about girls' play preferences and *Barbie Fashion Designer*, Kaveri Subrahmanyam and Patricia M. Greenfield (1998) explicitly admit, "We are not sure if it should be classified as a game" (p. 46). They deploy terminology like "entertainment software" for their analysis instead. Sega's Lee McEnany Caraher also refers to *Barbie Fashion Designer* as "interactive technology" for girls, stating that it is decidedly "not a game" because of the real-life application of its printable designs (Glos & Golden, 1998b, p. 195). Art director and illustrator for *Chop Suey,* Monica Gesue, also shared, "I don't see 'Chop Suey' as a game," explaining that it was an artwork first, with the activities added later at the request of "high powers" (Glos & Golden, 1998c, p. 187). A retrospective article on *Chop Suey* published in 2012 also similarly declares that "it wasn't a computer game" but rather recalls it to have been a "psychedelic exercise in 'let's-pretend'" (Frank, para. 2), showing that this sentiment persisted past the 1990s.

Although many of these commentaries revere the games, they nonetheless reflect the precarious acceptance of girls' games as legitimately belonging within the boyhood-driven videogame industry. Much of this has to do with the alternative types of play that arose out of focus group research into girls' interests. These forms did not conform to "real" game systems that celebrated violence and competition (see Consalvo & Paul, 2019). Girls' games were rather driven by narrative over action, incorporating exploration, puzzles, and relationship building instead. Market research conducted by girls' games developers found that girls had little interest in "mastering" a game space, preferring games without violence and competition in place of female characters, rich narratives, emotional relationships, and nurturing mechanics (Glos & Golden, 1998a; Laurel, 2013; Nakamura & Wirman, 2005).

These findings are limited, though, as they conflate sex with gender while reinforcing deep-rooted biological essentialisms. They have not gone untroubled in

[1] http://www.purple-moon.com, accessed via Web Archive.

game studies (Jenson & de Castell, 2011). As referenced earlier, the concept of a girl market itself, Catherine Driscoll (2002) says, risks the assumption of an impossible, monolithic definition of "girl" (p. 268). Culturally constituted gendered identity and a subject's gender performance must also be taken into account when considering the market research findings. As Mary Bryson and Suzanne de Castell (1998) succinctly state, "The answers provided have had very little to do with what a woman wants, and everything to do with what is wanted from a woman" (p. 238), implying that young girls may have provided answers that they believed were expected of them.

Mary Celeste Kearney (2010), however, cautions against reactive dismissals of "pink" products, as this risks us missing their progressive potential. The focus group findings crucially influenced the development of exciting and innovative modes of play, which would eventually be integrated beyond girls' gaming. Among these is the valuation of richer storytelling, as endeavoured by triple-A studios like Naughty Dog. There is also increasingly a greater integration of point-and-click exploration in place of win-conditions, as found within games that were at first derisively labelled "walking simulators," like *Dear Esther* (Chinese Room, 2012). Purple Moon's *Starfire Soccer Challenge* (1998) also extended the possibilities of sports games through its focus on character-driven storytelling and off-field social obstacles. A similar approach is found today in games like Nintendo's *Golf Story* (Sidebar Games, 2017), known and distinguished from other sports games for its titular story-mode. Purple Moon's self-appointed genre, "friendship adventures," has also become embedded in major triple-A games, where nurturing relationships is a central feature in games like BioWare's *Mass Effect* (2007–2012) and *Dragon Age* (2009–2014) series. Friendship mechanics also drive the "Confidant" system in the *Persona* series (Atlus, 1996–2019). Even the pleasure of dressing up characters in *Barbie Fashion Designer* and *McKenzie & Co.* has become a staple of online competitive shooters like *Apex Legends* (Respawn Entertainment, 2019) and *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017). Similar to girls' games, appearance changes are aesthetic only and not tied to bonus abilities; one need only replace "clothes" and "fashion" for "gear" and "skins."

Girls' games also experimented with hardware peripherals, contributing to the way that add-ons offer alternative embodiments of play. Take the *Easy-Bake Kitchen CD-ROM Playset* (Hasbro Interactive, 1999), which involved a plug-and-play toy kitchen set—with bowl, mixer, an egg—that allowed players to haptically engage with

the on-screen cooking game. Cooking games would later become almost definitive of the casual games movement through the immensely popular game *Cooking Mama* (Office Create, 2006), which also invokes gestural play through the Nintendo DS's touchscreen interface and stylus. As Luke van Ryn (2013) observes, "*Cooking Mama* originates many of the gameplay elements present in casual, mobile and social games" (p. 4).[2] Nintendo's Wii, released in 2006, was also central to the emergence of casual games and even more so distinguished itself through its interest in haptic play.[3] The Wii would influence Sony and Microsoft to develop their own motion-sensor systems: the PlayStation Move and Xbox Kinect, both released in 2010.

In Japan, the Casio Loopy (1995) console for girls also pushed the boundaries of what gaming platforms could do beyond the screen world.[4] The Loopy console included an in-built thermal sticker printer, as well as an optional add-on device, *The Magical Shop*, that could capture, edit, and print screenshots from a connected RCA source. The Loopy remains a unique and trailblazing platform that, like *Barbie Fashion Designer* and the *Easy-Bake*, brought play beyond the game screen, perhaps even influencing the play and print technology that would become an add-on for Nintendo's Game Boy and Game Boy Color in 1998. But Nintendo also participated in engaging girl markets through the Game Boy Color and peripheral technology. In 2000, Nintendo collaborated with Japanese sewing machine manufacturer Jaguar International to develop Game Boy software that would accompany their sewing machines. A similar collaboration was also arranged in the U.S. the following year with sewing machine manufacturer, Singer Corporation (see Steinkopf-Frank, 2020).[5] All of these novel, innovative, and experimental technologies demonstrate the influence girl markets had on how gaming hardware and the body of the player were imagined.

Discussions of the girls' games movement in scholarly and popular press, however, have mostly been centred around concerns over the movement's gendered

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[2] In Japan however, *Cooking Mama* builds on the Japanese games industry's longstanding history of developing games for girls and women as seen through Otome games or the Casio Loopy discussed in this section.

[3] Nintendo had, however, already experimented with haptic play add-ons since the 1980s, as seen in their 1984 game *Duck Hunt*, which came with a plastic gun to aim and shoot at the screen (van Ryn, 2013).

[4] Rachel Weil (as cited in Milligan & Bohunicky, 2020) cautions against assuming Western distinctions of gendered preferences onto Japanese markets.

[5] In chapter five, I coin the term "techno-femininity" to describe feminised objects like these.

stereotypes, essentialisms, and the marginalisation of girl players (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998b; Ochsner, 2015; Shaw, 2014, p. 170). Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins' edited anthology *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (1998a), offers an in-depth exploration of these debates, while also giving voice to the female developers behind the games through several interviews. Yet the innovative play mechanics that emerged from the girls' games movement have comparatively received little attention. An exception, however, is *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming* by Yasmin B. Kafai et al. (2008), published ten years after Cassell and Jenkins' anthology. In their introduction, Kafai et al. reflect on the popular games at the time that resisted explicit gendered marketing, like *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000) and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), which respectively embed nurturing systems of play, domestic themes, and group cooperation in spaces increasingly populated by female players. In 1998, Theresa Duncan had contemplated that "maybe girl games will rub off on games that are explicitly for men" (Glos & Golden, 1998c, p. 182). Yet these examples take Duncan's prediction further, as *The Sims* and *World of Warcraft* were not *for* any particular gender, but were nonetheless perceived as popular mainstream games.

Carly A. Kocurek has also produced crucial work in retrospectively unpacking girls' games broader industrial contributions through her analyses of Purple Moon games. Kocurek (2017) writes that the friendship adventures "were an early effort to disrupt the 'hegemony of play'" (p. 94) but were most groundbreaking for "convey[ing] to girls that their worries and dreams were worth taking seriously" (p. 97). An aim of this chapter is to build on Kocurek's observations and those of Kafai et al. (2008) by locating some of the similarities brought over from 1990s girls' games into today's Girlhood Games. First are the formal crossovers such as narrative centrality or the absence of violence. I am also interested in their transformative potential in reference to the possibility of girl players' self-reflection and identity experimentation. This latter point is central to my reading of Girlhood Games today. Laurel (1993/2013), in fact, designed Purple Moon games with the intention of creating what she calls "emotional rehearsal spaces" for girls (p. 83). This language closely speaks to the affordances I interpret in Girlhood Games today, which have the potential to offer transformative spaces for experimental performances. To trace how these transformative spaces have evolved from games *for* girls to games *about* girls, it is

useful to examine more precisely what girls' games looked like during their proliferation in the 1990s.

In her 1993 book, *Computers as Theatre*, Laurel suggests that computers be considered beyond operating tools and rather as mediums for communication and dramatic storytelling. In the second edition (1993/2013), Laurel frequently reflects on the Purple Moon games she had since developed. The games are described as exemplifying a computer's representational possibilities because their designs sought to establish and transmit meaning between the girl player and the software. Laurel's book goes on to identify parallels between computers and the staged space of a drama performance.[6] To create meaningful emotional rehearsal spaces within this technological "stage," Laurel draws on her market research with girls aged seven to twelve. In understanding her participants' methods of identity construction, Laurel considers two interrelated categories: "social life" and "inner life" (1993/2013, p. 83). Social life is driven by "affiliation and exclusion," "covert-power," "self-image," and "gossip," while the inner life involves "nurturing," "hidden knowledge," "self-awareness," and "magical tales" (Laurel, 1993/2013, p. 83). The *Rockett* series—set in a junior high school—would come to represent social life, while the more abstract and surreal *Secret Paths* series represented inner life.

The *Rockett* series encourages experimentation with variable outcomes rather than win or lose conditions. In the episodic series, players enter Whistling Pines Junior High as a new eighth-grade student, Rockett Movado. Through Rockett, players navigate the junior high's complex social politics, where often popularity comes into tension with kindness and staying true to oneself. The primary mechanic involves selecting one of up to three emotional responses to given social scenarios. In *Rockett's Secret Invitation* (1998), for example, Rockett receives a mysterious invitation in her locker with instructions to meet at a specified location and concludes with the words "happy birthday," unknowing that it is not, in fact, Rockett's birthday. Three emotional responses are offered to the player: "Wow this could be really cool!", "Mmm well, it sounds good but if it's what I think, this could get complicated," or "Oh no, how can I get out of this gracefully!" Importantly there are no definitively right or wrong responses, but they do provoke different outcomes and reactions from Rockett's peers.

[6] See also Molesworth and Denegri-Knott (2007) who imagine computer games as theatrical performances in the context of consumption fantasies.

Players are encouraged to replay the game to explore those alternative pathways. The intention, as Laurel (1993/2013) states, was to allow girls "to try out different social choices" (p. 159). She also describes the mechanics as a rehearsal process upon a stage for "emotional navigation" (1993/2013, p. 171). Playing the game invites varying approaches from the player, from selecting the response the player feels they would likely employ in their own social reality, mixed with responses they may aspire to have the confidence to assert.

Navigation in the *Rockett* series is tied to social situations, while the *Secret Paths* series is rather geographically designed through ethereal, fantasy landscapes. In these games, a distinct protagonist is absent, although younger versions of Whistling Pines' female students come to visit the players' club house to confide their inner troubles. After watching a short video where the character narrates their troubles, players pass through a door that transports them into the girls' inner life, represented as a pathway through a natural, dreamy landscape. While traversing the path, players must find hidden gemstones, while learning more about their friend the further they travel. Once all of the stones are found, a parable is shared to the character that helps her through her dilemma. The stones are threaded into a piece of jewellery and gifted to the character. A physical bracelet for players to wear is also included in the game's packaging. Describing the design intentions of the series, Laurel (1993/ 2013) writes, "Empathy is subject to the same emotional safety net as engagement—we experience the characters' emotions as if they were our own, but not quite; the elements of 'real' fear and pain are absent" (p. 145). The rehearsal of fear is also present in horror Girlhood Games, which is explored further in chapter four.

Players of Purple Moon games are thus offered an unreal space to practise and experiment with emotional responses—informed by the assumption that emotions are the domain of girls. The offline software space is a safe and discrete ground to do so and, in this way, it resembles the liminal affordances theorised by Victor Turner (1969), which I develop further in the following chapters. The interactive narratives function, as Kocurek (2017) observes, "not just as entertainment but as education, healing and catharsis" (p. 85). Like the experimental freedoms that are permitted to liminal, adolescent girls, these game spaces are realms that are seperate from adult scrutiny, where girls are invited to explore emotional expression and identity.

The concept of emotional rehearsal space does however, limit identity exploration to emotions, while throughout this thesis I rather include a breadth of agentic actions to my consideration of identity formation, like problem-solving, rebellion, self-defence, and cultural production, as well as intense emotions like fear and rage. I therefore employ the broader terminology, "transformative spaces," to extend Laurel's (1993/2013) notion of "emotional rehearsal." Some of these transformative actions, though, were indeed present in other 1990s girls' games, like Nancy's undercover sleuthing in Her Interactive's *Nancy Drew: Secrets Can Kill*, mentioned earlier as a prominent 1990s girls' game, where curiosity, rather than emotional navigation, is tied to the player's self-actualisation through the facilitation of their investigatory gaze.

Emotional rehearsal spaces, and girls' games in general, were marketed to children and pre-teen girls, while Girlhood Games today include a broader span of mature content. Emotional rehearsal space as a concept, though, is a useful starting point in theorising videogame affordances for girls. Laurel's design principals may certainly be located within recent Girlhood Games and deconstructing their workings reveals how Girlhood Games have evolved since the 1990s.

A major contrast between girls' games and Girlhood Games, though, is that Girlhood Games hold greater cultural legitimacy among both self-identified gamers as well as feminists. This is because Girlhood Games are developed with less marginalising gender-neutral designs and marketing, often embedding girlhood themes within traditional game formats. 1990s girls' games were already pushed to the periphery of gaming through their branding "for girls" and their reluctance to label themselves "games," while their rules and systems did not conform to the more valued mechanics of competition and mastery.[7]

Girls' games in the 1990s already struggled to gain acceptance by feminists, as many of them perpetuated stereotypical girls' interests, like popularity and appearance (Laurel, 2001, p. 3), while Barbie, who opened the door to these games, already carried a highly contentious legacy. One commentator on *Barbie Fashion Designer* even refers to the game as a "feminist-nightmare" (Beato, 1997, para. 24). Some of these critiques

[7] Kirkpatrick (2013; 2015) writes about this valuation through the use of the term "gameplay" in 1980s UK gaming magazines, also discussed in my introductory chapter. See also Espen Aarseth (2004), who famously wrote that Lara Croft's appearance is inconsequential in way of gameplay, thereby also reflecting this valuation.

are not without warrant. In *McKenzie & Co.*, for example, the experience of high school is determined by winning the attraction of a boy (and comes with one disc each for "Derrick," "Steven," "Brandon," and "Brett"). The fixation of gaining the love interest's approval, coupled with a subtle promotion of girls' self-regulation like problematic weight-loss advice, is rather uncomfortable to endure when playing today. The box also includes a lipstick and a makeup advice brochure, transporting the in-game makeover scenarios onto the player's actual body. The game's promotion of self-surveillance and body discipline thus demonstrate how Girlhood Games may subscribe to postfeminist values.[8]

Troubling postfeminist values, however, were fortunately not central to all girls' games. Others were notably more considerate in the messages imparted upon girl players. Writing about Nancy Drew's adaptation to gaming, for instance, Robyn Hope (2018) explains,

> Nancy's transition into the digital put her in a difficult position: rather than acting as an unfettered heroine in her own world, she became a transgressor in a masculine one. Herinteractive seemed aware of their impertinence; one of the earliest series taglines advertised the games as "For girls who aren't afraid of a mouse." (p. 70).

Hope (2018) goes on to describe the experience of playing as a "cathartic experience" for girls, as through Nancy, they operate around and outside of the masculine space of law enforcement (p. 72). The masculine world of crime-solving, Hope posits, is reflective of the masculine world of computing that the girl player asserts herself within when playing the game. The Nancy Drew games also participate within strong traditions that link women to crime-solving led by authors like Agatha Christie.

Along with their precarious acceptance by feminist critics, these games have also rarely been recognised as games within videogame culture, let alone acknowledged for their contribution to the medium. One way their derision by game enthusiasts may be measured is through their lack of valuation in gaming history. Studies of girls' gaming history have found that girls' games and girls' hardware have

[8] Kearney (2010) argues, however, that many of the criticisms directed towards "feminized products" often reflect "assumptions about girls' inabilities to read critically or oppositionally" (p. 4).

been historically neglected. In a paper on the Casio Loopy console, Chloe Anna Milligan and Kira Bohunicky (2020) note that while the Loopy's life span lasted only one year, other failed consoles targeted for boys, like the Bandai Pippin, have nevertheless been extensively documented and preserved in the medium's history. They point out that videogame histories privilege boyhood while disregarding the possibility of a feminine videogame culture—which I begin to amend in chapter five. The medium's male-centric history may be drastically challenged, though, if more inclusive documentation is practised. They write:

> Why care now about a casualty of the console wars that's no more than a footnoted failure in game history? Because the Loopy is more than that. By presenting the story of its failure as one to learn from, we argue that game studies can do better than to begrudgingly bemoan the history of video games as one designed for and by boys and men [...] We can use the Loopy to rethink other consoles, such as the Nintendo DS and Wii, as continuations of the Loopy's gendered legacy and succeeding because they directly included these audiences. (Milligan & Bohunickey, 2020, para. 21)

Tracing the presence of girlhood themes in videogames is one method of challenging the medium's hegemonic histories. Other individuals and organisations are also starting to address the need to assert the presence of feminine gaming cultures to videogame history. Rachel Simone Weil's FEMICOM Museum is building a digital and physical archive at femicom.org "dedicated to the preservation and reimagination of femme aesthetics and girlhood within twentieth-century video games, computing, and electronic toys" (Weil, 2021). Weil spoke to Milligan and Bohunickey for their article on the Loopy (2020) and shared her observations on the tendency of retro game enthusiasts to condemn and mock feminine content while ignoring moments of success. Weil states "These perspectives are usually so short-sighted, one-sided, and unresearched, and they function mostly as a vehicle for trashing femme aesthetics veiled as humor or progressive politics" (as cited in Milligan & Bohunickey, 2020, para. 4). Weil's FEMICOM Museum rather declares feminine games and game hardware as serious contributors to the medium's historical narrative.

In addition to Weil, Raven Simone's *The Bobdunga Show* on YouTube also contributes to making girls' games visible in gaming history. Simone covers several

girl-centric games in her videos on digital nostalgia, like the PlayStation 2's *Bratz Rock Angelz* (Blitz Games, 2005) and *Barbie Explorer* (Runecraft, 2001). She also conducts fascinating investigative dives into abandonware like *Clueless* and *Mean Girls* for 3DS, which were never released to the public. Scholars too are contributing to reforming hegemonic game histories, as seen in Laine Nooney (2013; 2020) and Carly A. Kocurek's (2017) historical accounts that strive to centre women's contributions and perspectives. Kocurek (2013) also interestingly notes that girls' games are further devalued monetarily. She writes about Purple Moon games being sold for next to nothing online as they are comparatively younger than other retro games, abundant copies were released, but also speculates that "they're judged as worth less culturally" (2013, para. 3), sharing in Weil's observations above.

Videogames around the time of the girls' games movement were a vastly different cultural field than today. Because they were perceived to be a niche boyhood pastime, attempts to create a girls' market led to a movement that continued to exclude them. Girls' games developers, though, were able to experiment with innovative game forms. These alternative play styles, along with girlhood narrative themes, are increasingly present in mainstream games today, which frequently recall Laurel's (1993/2013) "emotional rehearsal" spaces and that also centre teen girl protagonists, whose strong-headedness or inquisitive spirits resemble 1990s girl game heroines like Nancy Drew. These developers' innovations would begin to dissolve the distinction of "boy" and "girl" games, as the industry itself became ever-more present in family homes. Girlhood Games that did not conform to traditional play mechanics, however, would also inherit girls' games precarious cultural legitimacy. Girls' games were critiqued for their feminine content by both feminists (see Laurel, 2001) and by hobbyist historians (see in Bohunickey & Milligan, 2020), while their play formats led them to be disregarded as "games" altogether (Glos & Golden, 1998b; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 1998). As "casual games" began to emerge in the following decade and videogaming became even more normalised, the question of "what is a game?" continued to permeate around those designed for girls.

Casual Games and Girlhood Capital

A lot of the innovations at the heart of the girls' games movement carried over into casual gaming, which would then impact the broader games industry. Casual games are small, family friendly games with decreased time commitment, financial commitment, difficulty, violence, and graphic sophistication (see Juul, 2010). They were designed to invite players that were new or unfamiliar to gaming. Their marketing campaigns uniquely focussed on the players as much as the games, featuring children, girls, middle-aged women, the elderly, and families playing together. What Jesper Juul (2010) has dubbed the "casual revolution," coincided with the release of Nintendo's DS and Wii consoles in 2004 and 2006 respectively, as well as the simultaneously growing platformisation of mobile phones. Nintendo's president at the same, Satoru Iwata, explained, "The biggest problem is that [developers] need to satisfy core gamers, who want games with more volume and complexity, while they also need to satisfy average users who don't have as much knowledge" (Nintendo DS going Wireless, 2004, para. 7). He shared in a separate interview that the company's aims were in "creating entertainment that will be fun for anyone regardless of age, sex, or experience" (Nagata, n.d., para. 40). While not directly targeting girls in the way that 1990s girls' games sought, these statements nonetheless echo the intention to introduce gaming to an expanded demographic, and girls indeed became one of their central target markets. Similar to the girls' games movement, these games likewise integrated alternative play styles that veered away from traditional shooters, action adventure, and role-playing formats. Non-violent, non-competitive, friendship adventure, and puzzle games thus continued to be developed, with many incorporating female protagonists and hyperfeminine themes like shopping and cooking.

The major difference between the casual games movement and the girls' games movement was that casual games were immensely successful. They succeeded firstly in making a lot of money. Nintendo's Wii console outsold Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Sony's PlayStation 3 console (Cote, 2020, p. 2). Casual games also succeeded in their goal of expanding gaming demographics. They significantly contributed to the mainstreaming of videogames as everyday entertainment. As Juul (2010) observes, "The rise of casual games is the end of that small historical anomaly of the 1980s and 1990s when video games were played by only a small part of the population (p. 20). The Interactive Games and Entertainment Association's 2019 report showed that two

thirds of Australians play videogames, while women made up 47% of videogame players (Brand et al., 2019). This was a considerable increase from the 38% recorded in 2005 (Brand et al., 2019). As Amanda C. Cote (2020, p. 26) notes, however, gaming statistics are not immune from exhibiting bias. She explains that North America's Entertainment Software Association only measured physical games sales until 2009, meaning "casual" type games pre-installed on PCs and web-browser Flash games were excluded from the report.

In-depth feminist studies of casual games have centred on their illegitimate cultural status (Consalvo & Paul, 2019; Cote, 2020) and their gendered identity design (Chess, 2017). Gaming culture's rejection of casual games is frequently linked to their feminine designs being antithetical or "threatening" to hardcore traditions (Kubik, 2012; Vanderhoef, 2013). It is telling that questions concerning the definition of a game seem to consistently circulate around games created with girls and women in mind. Mia Consalvo and Christopher A. Paul extensively examine this question in their work *Real Games: What's Legitimate and What's Not in Contemporary Videogames* (2019). They note how those holding dominant cultural power assert hierarchical categorisations of "real" and marginal games (see also Cote, 2020).

The cultural marginalisation of casual games and players can be seen in Nintendo's promotional magazine *Girl Gamer* which ran between 2007 and 2009. *Girl Gamer* was packaged for free with UK girls' lifestyle magazines and featured games like *Cooking Mama* and *Nintendogs*. Its pages were bathed in pastel pinks and it adopted hyperfeminine language throughout. For instance, page fifteen of issue three, advertising DS accessories, is headlined "Extreme Makeover." On the one hand, the emergence of "casual gaming" in the mid-2000s marked a moment in which girls were once more perceived as valuable videogame consumers—and as casual gaming industries remain powerful today, we are still in this moment. On the other hand, however, these industrial practices still relegate girls outside of mainstream gaming culture while also binding them to feminine stereotypes. Nonetheless, by hailing girls as "gamers," objects like *Girl Gamer* magazine began to unsettle the deep-rooted hegemonic trappings of the term "gamer" (see Shaw, 2012) reflecting the casual games movement's broader aims to redefine gaming.

Before the following chapters examine what those games look like, it must be emphasised that casual games were hugely visible sites for playing with girlhood

themes. Representations of coming-of-age in casual game spaces have become overlooked among discussions of cultural tensions (Vanderhoef, 2013), mobile platformisation (Nieborg, 2018), microtransactions (Ramirez, 2015), as well as ongoing concerns for gendered separatism, designing girls and women as ideal subjects, and demarcating them to a genre (Chess, 2017). But it is worth also questioning how the games themselves contributed to representations of girlhood, how they have borrowed from or evolved from the aims of the girls' games movement, and to what extent they may serve as transformative spaces for girl players if we are to understand their impact on Girlhood Games today.

Not all casual games were about girlhood and coming-of-age experiences. In fact, few were. Instead, management games like *Farmville* (Zynga, 2009) and *Diner Dash* (Gamelab, 2003), puzzle or match-three games like *Candy Crush Saga* (King, 2012), nurturing games like *Nintendogs,* or creativity games like *Art Academy* (Headstrong Games, 2009) were among those developed to appeal to girls and women. A popular casual game that *did* include girlhood themes is Pocket Gems' 2013 free-to-play game *Episode—Choose Your Story* (hereafter *Episode*). *Episode* offers an intriguing insight into how casual games designed for girl players integrated playable girlhood representations. The game follows a choose-your-own adventure format, where players select a story they would like to play from the home menu. While *Episode* does not state that it is explicitly "for girls," as was the norm for girls' games in the 1990s, it does feature mostly girl-centric adventures related to dating, friendships, and sex. On the game's web page, for instance, the featured stories include "My Brother's Hot Friend," "It'll Be Our Secret," "Me & 2 Bad Boys," and "Girl in a Boy Band," with licensed content like "Pretty Little Liars," and a celebrity collaboration, "Demi Lovato Path to Fame," all of which picture feminine-coded protagonists on their previewed icons.[9]

The stories themselves somewhat appropriate Laurel's (1993/2013) friendship adventures and the concept of emotional rehearsal. First, they are interactive narratives told in episodes, much like the Rockett series. In "My Brother's Hot Friend," players are able to design a character, named Lola by default, who moves from her dad's house to live with her mother and brother to complete her final year of high

[9] https://www.episodeinteractive.com/

school. While capturing the heart of the brother's "hot friend" Caleb is central to the story, Lola can also earn friendship points with her peers based on the players' decisions. Confiding your feelings to Toby, for instance, earns "+1 friendship" and a note that "Toby appreciated you can trust him." In another scenario, the decision to "Be bold and speak your mind" in response to Avery's confessed desire to be "Queen Bee," results in a note that reads, "Avery thinks your annoying." The notion of decisions having social consequences is thus present in this casual game—which, like its episode format, is also a central mechanic to both the Purple Moon games that came before it, and would also be found in the Girlhood Game *Life Is Strange* released soon after.

The social politics of the high school setting resonate with Laurel's (1993/2013) "social life" design approach in Purple Moon's Rockett series, while the mature themes and attention to dating and appearance recall the gendered values that *McKenzie & Co*. featured. *Episode,* however, attempts to update some of those values to be more inclusive of contemporary players, including stories, for instance, that explore same-sex relationships. There are also some minor attempts to be more inclusive of race and body type in its character designs, although most of this is via the players' own customisation efforts, while a number of games do not offer customisation at all. Non-customisable games tend to be heavily skewed to centre white bodies (Soule, 2017). Customisation was also not an original feature, but rather added later in 2016.

Episode further redistributes responsibility of representational diversity through players' own choices, reflecting what Shaw (2014) critiques to be a neoliberal responsibility for accessing diversity. At the same time though, the transformative affordances of *Episode* lie precisely in its participatory systems. *Episode* features stories by internal staff writers, as well as freelance and fan contributors. Players can contribute, publish, and even potentially profit from writing their own stories. *Episode*'s 'Writer Portal' includes a library of backgrounds, outfits, and characters along with a tutorial on how to create stories. The game's website also hosts a community forum for promoting stories and sharing design tips. Contributors wanting to be published must be at least thirteen-years-old and have parental permission if under seventeen. Those wanting to register for writer payments must be over eighteen.

Creating fictional fantasies was one of many girls' interests found by researchers studying girls' play preferences in the 1990s (Subrahmanyam &

Greenfield, 1998). Games like *Rockett's Adventure Maker* (Purple Moon, 1998) and *Barbie Storymaker* (Mattel Media, 1997) reflect these findings. Appealing to girls through creativity was believed to foster literacy in computing. While this was one of the stated aims of the girls' games movement, the games themselves did not include player access to mod their software, limiting an encouragement of programming (Hayes, 2008). The Writer Portal, however, is a coding interface and is accessible through *Episode*'s web page (on desktop only). Unlike *Rockett's Adventure Maker*'s limited click-and-drag interface, the Writer Portal involves coding language to script dialogue and map character actions. As Cass Marshall (2019) rightly points out, *Episode* "has quietly created a new generation of game developers" (para. 2). Sharing stories involves promotion on social media and community forums, where mood boards and advice regarding design problems and inclusive character representation are exchanged. Authors can also track their read counts and receive fan mail from other players.

At the same time, the Writer Portal encourages an outpour of fan labour benefitting a multi-million-dollar corporation obscured behind a declaration of girl empowerment. Stories require a tremendous reader metric score before creators are eligible to receive payments. The stories too are limited by strict content regulation. "Excessive promotion of political agenda" for example is not permitted in stories (Content Guidelines, p. 3). The Writer Portal is hence what Jonathan Gray (2010) would call a "policed playground" (p. 165). This means that Pocket Gems have set the parameters for content production so that fan labour can be used without compromising *Episode*'s scope of content.

All of this said, some girls are nonetheless using the portal for transformative expression. Among these, Marshall (2019) mentions a story about "a New Mexican vampire fighting back against bigoted legislation," (para. 14) and another that features commentary on the Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting (para. 17). While romance is the dominant genre, others have used the Writer Portal to create mysteries and thrillers too. Unfortunately, most of the featured content comes from *Episode*'s internal writers, who appear to have little interest in telling stories beyond heterosexual dating. The centrality of shopping, too, cannot be overstressed. The game is littered with microtransactions for unlocking new stories, particular narrative choices, customisation options, and character clothing. Players of "My Brother's Hot Friend"

for instance, have to pay if they want Lola to eat lunch with her peers, otherwise the only free option is to reject Caleb's invitation and sit in the cafeteria by herself. Lola also loses her luggage at the airport, so her mother takes her shopping for a new wardrobe. The wardrobe options, however, are not free, and so players unwilling to pay must settle with the plain grey sweatshirt Lola wore on her flight.

Shira Chess has completed extensive research on the designed feminine values embedded in casual games and has found that consumerism has been intricately tied to women markets. Chess (2017) writes, "Women are not there to play but to *consume*" (p. 123). Situating girlhood around consumption works to reiterate postfeminist pressures upon girls to regulate their identity through capitalist participation (Gill, 2007; Harris, 2004). On the other hand, Chess (2017) also notes that "consumption is a path toward a certain degree of mobility […] Women's consumption within the casual market over recent years has caused many in the video game industry to take note and rethink gaming audiences" (p. 123). Girl players have also established resistant strategies to circumnavigate *Episode*'s pressure to spend real money (Kim, 2021). Do Own Kim's research has found that players share "premium" narrative outcomes with others through blogs and walkthroughs, while others strive to intentionally receive the supposed "'losing' endings" (2021, p. 14). The *Episode* community therefore reflects a minor disruption to postfeminism's compulsion toward individual success (Kim, 2021). Girls even make use of the game's community forums to vent their frustrations about the misogynistic storytelling by Pocket Gem's internal writers.

The prevalence of dating and consumerism, however, nonetheless exposes a limited imagining of girlhood central to these games. The preview images displayed in the app store for *Episode* and its similar games—*Choices: Stories You Play* (Pixelberry Studios, 2016), and *Chapters: Interactive Stories* (Crazy Maple Studio, 2017)—all centralise romance or character customisation, signalling little change from the dating and shopping that was so central to games in the 1990s like *McKenzie & Co.*. Feminine themes resonate with many girls, and it would be wrong to assume that girls interested in shopping and dating are passive, cultural dupes (McCann, 2018). Representing girlhood *only* in this way, however, alienates many others. Girls and women hence continue to be treated as a "genre" rather than a market with multidimensional interests (see Chess, 2017, p. 39; Cote, 2020, pp. 88–89).

Albeit riddled with gendered assumptions and targeted only to a feminised demographic, casual games like *Episode* offered a monumentally visible site for representations of girlhood that deal with coming-of-age themes like high school social politics. Meanwhile, *Episode*'s Writer Portal addresses the girls' games movement's missed opportunity to cultivate girls' interest in computers and coding. In chapter five, however, I argue that girls were already coding within their own DIY cultures in the 1990s and 2000s in spaces separate from the commercial games industry. In the 2010s though, the casual games movement was still significant in redefining industrial assumptions towards gaming and gamers. While representations of girlhood received little improvement in casual games, they did maintain and, in some ways, update the potential for transformative engagement. The decision-based mechanics of games like *Episode* maintain Laurel's concept of emotional rehearsal spaces. Casual gaming, however, also continues to share in the girls' games movement's cultural discredit. Casual gaming's legacy upon Girlhood Games today may ultimately be premised on how perceptions of the medium shifted from subcultural boy's hobby into a "normal" (Juul, 2010) entertainment industry.

In contextualising Girlhood Games today, games designed for girls certainly play a pivotal role. Their gendered marketing, however, has evidently restricted their girlhood representations to hyperfeminine stereotypes. Echoing many of the commentaries made regarding the 1990s girls games movement, Cote (2020) suggests:

> The way forward for gaming may not be to offer distinct female and male subject positions, or "men's games" and "women's games," but rather to provide a diversity of positions from which players can explore different ways of being. (p. 113)

The remaining chapters of this thesis examine instances where Cote's words have begun to be realised. But this does not mean that contemporary games were the first to develop Girlhood Games to a market that was neither "male" nor "female." On the contrary, the 1990s girl's games movement and the emergence of the casual games movement in the following decade were both predicated on assumptions that girls were not playing videogames. Prior, during, and after the 1990s and mid-2000s, however, girlhood-themed games were already in circulation; games that resisted

gendered marketing and that reported broad player demographics. To better contextualise my contemporary case studies and the evolution of interactive girlhoods, I now turn to the Girlhood Games that coexisted with girls' games.

Girlhood Beyond Girls' Games

While girlhood coming-of-age perspectives were indeed found more frequently in games developed for girls, representations of girlhood were not limited to these gendered spaces. A small but not insignificant number of games coexisted alongside girls' games that offered girlhood perspectives within gender-neutral spaces. The Girlhood Games of the 2010s that I analyse in the following chapters participate in themes from girls' games as well as those found within non-gendered games. Like my post-2010 case studies, Girlhood Games from the 1980s to the mid-2000s resisted both girlie hyperfeminine and boyish hypermasculine representations and stories and were coded for neither "boys" nor "girls." They therefore reflect what Cote (2020) would later call for in offering "a diversity of positions from which players can explore different ways of being" (p. 113). In these games, girlhood themes were *normal*.

Two games that came before the girls' games movement were *King's Quest IV: The Perils of Rosella* (Sierra On-Line, 1988) and *The Legend of Kyrandia 2: The Hand of Fate* (Westwood Studios, 1993), which both deploy monomythic or heroes' journey adventures within fantasy settings. Both games are sequels within established series' that had until then featured male protagonists. In a formula so pervasively contingent with male rites of passage (Tatar, 2021), these two games update the hero's journey by placing young women at the centre of their mythical quests. They are hence spaces for playing out girls' coming-of-age experiences, as the hero's journey is very much predicated upon identity trials and growth.

The two series both also belong to the "adventure games" genre, which are games driven by narrative, exploration, and puzzle-solving with usually minimal action and violence. Adventure games resemble some of the alternative play features that girls' games and casual games took on, like story navigation and puzzles, although they maintain winning and losing conditions and are often extremely difficult; features more aligned with traditional "hardcore" values. Adventure games also overwhelmingly featured male protagonists, many for instance, map film noir

conventions onto rugged investigators.[10] The merging of these styles, though, along with the incorporation of female protagonists, demonstrates more representational innovation. Players are just as likely to have been drawn to games like *King's Quest IV* because of an interest in adventure games or fantasy settings as they were to games designed with gendered presumptions.

Perhaps the genre's inclusive possibilities may be attributed to the women developers behind their successful titles, namely Sierra On-Line's Roberta Williams and Jane Jenson. Taking Sierra On-Line as a studio case study, Angela R. Cox (2018) proposes that to achieve representational inclusivity, "there must first be diversity and support for that diversity in the workplace" (p. 33). Cox's latter point on workplace support is crucial, as only adding diversity risks downplaying developer accountability. As Shaw (2014) explains, this sentiment risks the assumption that male developers are "incapable of creating texts that are not representations of themselves or their fantasies" or that "all women are feminists" (p. 5).

The inclusion of female protagonists like Rosella in *King's Quest IV* and the centrality of developer Roberta William's identity around the series' marketing likely led to its significant female player base (Nooney, 2013). Videogame historian Laine Nooney (2013) approximates that roughly 200,000 of *King's Quest*'s half a million players were women "during an era when most game historians believe women didn't play games" (para. 15). These statistics reveal firstly that there were in fact girls playing games;[11] secondly, that girlhood themes were not exclusively innovated from within girls' games studios; and thirdly, that games with girlhood perspectives had a place in core gaming.

Sierra On-Line was particularly committed to welcoming girls to core gaming without producing segmented games that marginalised them from other releases. Along with *King's Quest IV*, Sierra On-Line developed a number of games with girl and young woman protagonists including their child-friendly edutainment game *Pepper's Adventures in Time* (1993), and their gore-filled horror game, *Phantasmagoria*

[10] Among these are *Tex Murphy: Mean Streets* (Access Software, 1989), *Grim Fandango* (LucasArts, 1998), *Discworld Noir* (Perfect Entertainment, 1999), and *The Dame Was Loaded* (Beam Software, 1995).

[11] Girls were also found to have played videogames in the 1980s and 1990s in other national contexts. Melanie Swallwell's (2010) work on arcade spaces in New Zealand shows evidence of girls present as players, while an Australian report (Skinner, 1996) on household IT use in the late 1990s recorded a fairly even gender split in game players.

(1995). Pepper and *Phantasmagoria*'s Adrienne, however, are perhaps respectively more representative of pre- and postliminal subjectivity, as Pepper is a child, and Adrienne is a married woman. The protagonist of Sierra's *The Colonel's Bequest,* however, is Laura Bow, a college student and amateur sleuth in the process of finding her place in the world. The game thus represents an early and overlooked space for exploring girlhood in videogames. It is inspired by an Agatha Christie mystery, where players, as Laura, must solve a series of murders occurring over an evening in 1925 at an eerie former-plantation manor resting among the bayous of Southern Louisiana. There is little overt coming-of-age storytelling with Laura's growth rather subtly projected: instead of presenting Laura as effortlessly fearless, the game's descriptive language emphasises that she persists despite being afraid. Descriptions include: "Nervously, you peak into the open vault" and "Quite afraid now, you fear greatly for your own life!" Laura's triumph then validates her investigatory drive needed to pursue a career in journalism after college.

The Colonel's Bequest was released almost ten years before the first Nancy Drew game (*Nancy Drew: Secrets Can Kill*) and while the games came from dissimilar studio contexts, their heroines have much in common. Laura and Nancy both represent a powerful disruption to patriarchal investigative authorities. They also both knowingly harness others' undermining presumptions regarding their youth and gender to evade suspicion while carrying out their investigations. Crucially, both *The Colonel's Bequest* and the Nancy Drew series functioned as transformative spaces for girl players' identity construction. An analysis of fan testimonials on the Her Interactive website found that Nancy Drew games even cultivated some players' future careers in STEM fields (Starks et al., 2014). Meanwhile, Brie Code (2017) and Carrie Patel (Tieryas, 2016) are two game developers who attribute playing Laura Bow to their careers in game design.[12] Both games hence address the professed goal of the girls' games movement to encourage girls to pursue careers in programming, which is one method of assessing their transformative potential.

The purpose of drawing comparisons between these two games is to highlight earlier instances of transformative girlhood spaces that the girls' games movement and Girlhood Games today have been built upon, but also to point out changing industrial

[12] Code's pronouns are they/she.

perceptions on girl players. *The Colonel's Bequest* challenges the assumption that the industry only catered to boys. While its Agatha Christie-like mystery, gothic manor, and girl sleuth may appeal to girls, its blue and black cover features the Colonel's silhouette and not Laura, which, coupled by the title, balances the game from appearing "too girlie" or "too boyish." *Nancy Drew: Secrets Can Kill* also deploys a blue and black colour scheme for its box art, although it shifts the girl detective game from core gaming to girls' gaming through its gendered studio name, Her Interactive, and the overt labelling "For Adventurous Girls" on its packaging. The girls' games movement, though, was not incorrect in assuming that girl players were still marginalised, and that girlhood themes were indeed still underrepresented. Although the movement's reliance on gendered advertising only devalued girls' games like Nancy Drew. Sierra On-Line games have certainly received greater cultural legitimacy than Her Interactive games.[13]

When remembering the presence of girls in videogames, games like *The Colonel's Bequest* are often overshadowed by girls' games. While Sierra On-Line developed girlhood spaces that preexisted the girls' games movement, other Girlhood Games coexisted and outlasted the movement. In 1999, the girls' games movement was coming to a close and Purple Moon was sold to Mattel. Games with girlhood themes, however, persisted on consoles and within gender-neutral franchises. In the same year as Purple Moon's acquisition, *Um Jammer Lammy* (NanaOn-Sha, 1999) was released on the first PlayStation console and was a sequel to the rhythm game *PaRappa the Rapper* (NanaOn-Sha, 1996). *PaRappa the Rapper* was reportedly received well "not just with the usual gamers, but with an elusive market of girls" (We are the music makers, 1999, para. 2). Recognising this, *Um Jammer Lammy* has players take on the role of Lammy, an anthropomorphic girl lamb, who comes to learn that the confidence she feels when playing the guitar is always inside her. *Kya: Dark Lineage* (Eden Games) is another example that was released on PlayStation 2 a few years later in 2003. The game is a platforming action adventure where players take on another monomythic journey through the teen girl protagonist, Kya, who embarks on an otherworldly journey to rescue her brother. These are just two examples of games

[13] Her Interactive are also likely less valued in gaming histories because they are still developing games today, weakening their "retro" standing.

that are overlooked girlhood spaces, yet they demonstrate that Girlhood Games have a more nuanced history than just within games for girls.

Another under-analysed trend is the relationship between girls in games, girls' games, and licensing. Barbie and Nancy Drew, for example, are two recognisable figures that were central to the girls' games movement. Licensed titles, however, were not all necessarily targeted for girls, but nonetheless serve as another huge area for girlhood themed games. The PlayStation 2 in particular was home to an enormous catalogue of licensed titles from a variety of film and television shows with little limits on thematic content. The console remains at the time of writing to be the highest selling video game console on record (Sirani, 2019). After a significant price drop in 2001, it entered many family homes as a cheap DVD player. Meeting its high sales, the PlayStation 2 received an enormous volume of wide-ranging titles. Like the casual games movement a few years later, the PlayStation 2 began to normalise videogaming as an entertainment form.

Because of this, the PlayStation 2 experienced what one journalist remembers as an "ungodly" flood of licensed games (Swan, 2021, para. 6). In addressing girl players, perhaps these licensed titles spoke to Subrahmanyam and Greenfield's (1998) study of girl players' interests, where they found that girls "like nonaggressive play activities [...] set in familiar settings with familiar characters" (p. 66). Whether these gendered conclusions reflect reality or not, demographic generalisations have a lasting presence in game design (Chess, 2017). In the case of the PlayStation 2, though, it seemed to be less about specifically including girls and rather about developing games about everything for everyone. Almost every screen media franchise was looking to extend their IPs into videogames.

Some of the licensed girl-centered games released on the PlayStation 2 were *Mary-Kate and Ashley: Sweet 16—Licensed to Drive* (n-Space, 2002), *Totally Spies! Totally Party* (OUAT Entertainment, 2008), *The Powerpuff Girls: Relish Rampage* (VIS Entertainment, 2002), and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds* (Eurocom, 2003). Some of these endorse hyperfeminine values and consumer identities discussed earlier in relation to *Episode*, like the fashion and shopping themes among the *Totally Spies* and *Mary-Kate and Ashley* mini games. Others embed traditional mechanics like the fighting and action adventure format as seen in *Buffy: Chaos Bleeds*. This variety of game styles reflect gaming's increasingly broader demographics

in the early 2000s. Licensed titles moreover became a wide-reaching site for girlhood that acknowledged variable ways of performing femininity.

While the PlayStation 2 was dubbed a "golden age" of licensing (Swan, 2021), licensed games had long contributed to Girlhood Spaces. Each of the game's listed above, for instance, had simultaneous releases on other consoles, like the GameCube or the Wii, both released after the PlayStation 2. Prior, though, were games like *American McGee's Alice* (Rogue Entertainment, 2000), an immensely popular gritty action adventure inspired by Alice in Wonderland that was initially released on PC and Macintosh. Games based on the television series *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (Scovell, 1996–2003) were also developed for the PC around the same time.[14] There were also licensed games made for the original PlayStation console, like the music video game *Spice World* (SCE Studios, 1998). A little earlier, in fact coinciding with the girls' games movement, was *Bishōjo Senshi Sailor Moon: Another Story* (Angel, 1995), an RPG for the Super Famicom released in Japan, where girl videogame players had long been recognised. The game has since amassed an exceptional Western cult following and in 2019 fans released a localised update for North American players (Diaz, 2019). Japan strongly contributed to developing videogames around girlhood, although I've limited my engagement to mostly Western texts in this chapter to avoid inserting Western gender constructions onto non-Western contexts (see Milligan & Bohunickey, 2020).

Looking at girlhood in games outside of the often-cited girls' games and casual games movements shows how girlhood has been simultaneously present in core gaming spaces. Albeit minimal, corners of the industry, like Sierra On-Line, have consistently acknowledged that girls play core games. The company's statistics on male players (Nooney, 2013) further attests that boys and men are not detracted by girlhood themes. These earlier representations demonstrate a valuation of girlhood that seems to have slipped through the cracks of feminist game studies. In the period I have covered, between the late 1980s to early 2000s, the medium was still an overwhelmingly masculine space. Yet these early disruptions laid the foundations for the increasing centrality of girlhood in mainstream gaming today. Sierra On-Line and licensed games show that it was already possible to represent various forms of girlhood

[14] Including *Sabrina the Teenage Witch: Brat Attack* (Hypnotix, 1999) and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch: Spellbound* (Rare Medium, 1999).

and femininity that ventured beyond the essentialist and hyperfeminine trappings of gendered marketing. Laura Bow can coexist with Barbie; Buffy can coexist with Mary-Kate and Ashley.

While these characters represent various roles and perform various actions within their different gaming contexts, many of them nonetheless represent a relatively one-dimensional display of femininity. Most of the games referenced throughout this chapter privilege traditional conceptions of femininity as well as white, thin bodies, and, where romance is referenced, heterosexual desire. The racial ambiguity of *Kya: Dark Lineage*'s Kya offers one of few exemptions. So does Lammy from *Um Jammer Lammy*, who is celebrated as a gay icon among online fan communities—there is a dedicated Twitter page, @lammyisgay, titled "Lammy is a Lesbian." Today, the nuances of feminine performance are increasingly more visible, as is the intersection of queer identity. Ellie from *The Last of Us*, for example, is a queer girl and tomboy hypervisible to core gaming, while Clementine from Telltale's *The Walking Dead: Season 2* (2013) represents the mainstream industry's slow but steady improvement towards representing girls of colour as playable protagonists. While these earlier girlhood spaces are less intersectional, they had begun to imagine the possibility of valuing girlhood within core game spaces. The history that I have presented encourages discussions of girls in games to move beyond concerns regarding gendered marketing and instead unpack a more holistic evolution of girlhood across wider videogames contexts.

Conclusion

Girlhood Games today are intricately connected to girls' games. They are also indebted to the ongoing, albeit minimal, presence of girlhood within core spaces. Girls' games, like Purple Moon's *Rockett* and *Secret Paths* series, contributed innovative game styles that replaced violence and competition with friendship and nurturing, while *Episode* succeeded in encouraging girls to computing. Girlhood themes within core spaces, meanwhile, demonstrated that girlhood themes had a place in core spaces, while studios like Sierra On-Line challenged the misconception that girls were not playing traditional videogames. Girlhood Games that conform to traditional play mechanics, however, have received greater cultural legitimacy than girls' games. The question of

what comprises a game has always circulated around girls' games, from cultural gatekeeping and within the girls' games studios themselves. This continues today in Girlhood Games that maintain "non-core" play formats.

In the introduction of this chapter I asked how industry perceptions of girl players have transformed and how in-game girlhood representations have evolved. The remainder of this thesis demonstrates how Girlhood Games carry on earlier representations of girlhood and the innovative play mechanics outlined in this chapter. Since the girls' games movement, the definition of videogames has continued to be radically challenged and redefined. The case studies of chapters two (*Oxenfree*), three (*Life Is Strange*), and five (*Secret Little Haven* and *Lost Memories Dot Net*) celebrate this ongoing transformation. Meanwhile, the casual games movement and the PlayStation 2 helped shift gaming from subculture to ubiquitous entertainment, while Girlhood Games in core spaces were already quietly proving the valued place of girls' themes and perspectives in mainstream gaming. Chapter four's case study, *The Last of Us,* is a high-profile testament to these legacies. Most importantly, the case studies in each of the following chapters build upon the agency, resilience, and strength of characters like Laura Bow, Nancy Drew, and Lammy, as well as Purple Moon's approach to considerate emotional rehearsal. They hence demonstrate the ongoing transformative potential of Girlhood Game spaces for girl players.

But in addition to contextualising the following analyses, I have also provided a history of girls' presence in videogames. Albeit minimal, girls' coming-of-age experiences and perspectives have always quietly been explored through videogames, yet they have been overshadowed by critical analyses around markets and presumed gendered preferences. The history I have presented in this chapter considers girlhood as a theme in a variety of game formats rather than focussing sole attention to demographic marketing strategies, thereby shifting the conversation from "girls' games" to "Girlhood Games."

2. Navigating the Threshold:

Oxenfree and Anti-Structure

Introduction

Having overviewed the varied presence of girlhood themes in past videogames, I now turn to the nature of Girlhood Games today. Contemporary Girlhood Games are distinct from peripheral market categories like "girls' games" and "casual games." They instead reflect a normalisation of girlhood themes within both "core" and "non-core" game formats (concepts discussed in the previous chapter) and are not necessarily tied to gendered targeting.

The textual analyses in the remainder of the thesis show several ways that Girlhood Games hold transformative potential for girl players. Each game is imagined, in a different way, as a liminal space for girls to take on experimental and subversive identities; the values of which may then be drawn upon after exiting the fantasy space. To unpack the nuances of liminal theory and its application to Girlhood Games, I first examine Night School Studios' *Oxenfree* (2016).

Oxenfree is an appropriate case study to introduce these concepts because of its engagement with adolescent transformation, threshold settings, and "anti-structure"; a term central to Victor Turner's (1969) framing of liminality, introduced in the thesis' opening chapter. *Oxenfree* disturbs ideological narratives of adolescent development as described in anthropology and the Western *Bildungsroman* tradition, to be defined in a later section. On the surface, however, the game at first stands as a clear example of how traditional components of the *Bildungsroman* may be mapped onto game spaces. In *Oxenfree* these components are seen primarily through its adolescent cast of characters on the cusp of graduation, and the social and identity—and supernatural—trials they experience. I therefore first identify *Oxenfree*'s traditional *Bildungsroman* themes to show how Girlhood Games intersect with the genre.

Outlining *Bildungsroman* conventions also provides context to then discuss how *Oxenfree* simultaneously unsettles them. The remainder of the chapter unpacks

how the game challenges ideologies surrounding girls' development, first through its time-slips, and also through its cyclical conclusion. These features destabilise the notion that one's liminal status is a fleeting phase to be ultimately overcome or completed. The game hence overturns the traditionally linear developmental trajectory of beginning, middle, and end as observed through anthropological accounts of ritual transition (van Gennep, 1909/1960) and cemented through the Western *Bildungsroman*.

I situate my discussion through a feminist adaptation of Turner's anti-structural comprehension of liminality. Girlhood Games like *Oxenfree* function as anti-structural and hence liberating spaces for girl players. In *Oxenfree*, that structure is never restored and so its heroine never re-enters normative postliminal society—and its oppressive systems—showing, in turn, an alternative mode of development in which liminal freedoms are maintained. An overview of the game is first helpful for clarification.

Oxenfree

Oxenfree is a five- to six-hour-long 2.5D supernatural adventure game.[1] It was pitched by its designers as a "walking talking game" (Skybound, 2016b, 1:57) because its primary mechanics involve exploration and selecting dialogue options. The game is set in America's North-west and takes place over a single evening on the fictional Edwards Island. The island is a former World War II military base turned day-time tourist destination. As the sun descends, it is inscribed with a haunting and enchanting energy. Creative director Adam Hines describes the art style as the blending of a "fairy tale children's book" with an "adult complexity" (Skybound, 2016a, 2:20–2:26).

Players are initially guided where to travel on the island, though opportunities for exploration increase as they progress. Despite being a narrative-centric videogame, *Oxenfree* does not deploy any cut scenes (with the exception of the epilogue). When an area or object on the island triggers a sequence or dialogue tree between characters, the player is always free to keep moving. There are meanwhile few compulsory lines

[1] The encouraged replay of the game complicates its overall run-time. I write 2.5D because the game is neither strictly 2D nor 3D. Like 2D games, the camera is fixed to a wide view, yet players may move forwards and backwards as well as left and right.

assigned to the protagonist other than those automatically prompted from interacting with certain items or during the game's epilogue voice-over. Hines explains the premise as "a coming-of-age tale that you can kind of choose how you come of age" (Skybound, 2016b, 3:36–3:46). The player therefore takes on a substantial degree of control in shaping their character's personality, including the option to earn a "Strong, Silent Type" achievement for declining to speak at all.

The "coming-of-age tale" belongs to Alex, an introverted, blue-haired, seventeen-year-old, girl of colour who is approaching high school graduation and its implication of impending adulthood. She travels to Edwards Island with her childhood friend Ren and her new step-brother Jonas where they meet up with their peer from school Nona and Nona's friend Clarissa. As the player first begins to roam the island, Ren details to newcomer Jonas—and to players—the nature of their visit: "We are not allowed here after dark, the town is shut down, and we—the Camena High junior class—have come to commit improper acts." Ren explains that their prohibited visit to the island at night belongs to a ritualistic tradition that dates back to the military recruits from the 1950s. Alex also packs a handheld radio because of a folkloric rumour that voices belonging to a non-existent radio station can be heard while on the island.

When Alex tunes into a specific frequency, she accidently activates a temporal tear that distorts the rules of time and space. In doing so, the group awaken the spirits from an accidental friendly-fire bombing of a war-time submarine, who are trapped neither dead nor alive in a time and space loop. The spirits seek to possess the four teenagers by dawn as a means of returning to the living. The goal of the game is then to find a method of leaving the island. Echoes of horror conventions, particularly the teen slasher, are therefore also present—although horror devices in Girlhood Games will be comprehensively discussed in chapter five. Escaping the island involves semi-directed wandering towards potentially useful landmarks like the island's various communication buildings. This wandering, however, is frequently interjected by temporal disruptions, forcing players to repeat the same area multiple times. Alex is also frequently transported back in time to moments visiting the island with her recently deceased brother, Michael.

One of the most compelling elements of *Oxenfree* is its conclusion, where despite the narrative outcomes based upon the player's choices, Alex will inevitably become trapped in the island's time and space loop herself. The game concludes with

the teenagers leaving the island by boat accompanied with a voiceover by Alex describing each of the characters' lives after graduation. The image then distorts and glitches, and Alex's voice begins to resemble the unsettling pitch of the island's spirits. Alex then discusses her plans to travel to the island with her high school peers, as if for the first time.

Following the credits, players then have the option to "preserve" or to "reset" the timeline on the main menu. Resetting the timeline enables them to replay the game as before, while preserving the timeline opens up new dialogue options throughout the replay that allude to Alex experiencing a form of déjà vu. In this continued playthrough, players may attempt to warn Alex's past self to refrain from visiting the island, although the continued loop remains an option on the home screen, suggesting the futility of closing the loop. As long as players continue playing the game, Alex will always remain on the island.

Oxenfree's emerging appearance in scholarly discussions has mostly been in relation to interactive storytelling strategies. The game has been understood as producing perceived player agency (Kway & Mitchell, 2018), evoking a ludonarrative epiphany (Lint et al., 2018), for destabilising the conventional concept of self-contained gameplay (Mitchell, 2018), and through the lens of the gothic and uncanny (Waszkiewicz, 2019). This chapter builds on *Oxenfree*'s growing presence in scholarly literature by situating it as a Girlhood Game that explores anti-structural initiation while challenging traditional *Bildungsroman* structures.

Girlhood Games and *Bildungsroman*

The term *Bildungsroman* was coined in Germany in the early 1800s. It describes a philosophical novel (*roman*) concerned with life cultivation, education, and development (*Bildung*) (Martini, 1991). At its most basic, *Bildungsroman* stories chart a character's personal growth. They are typically then centred on transitional, liminal subjects, namely those passing through adolescence, while celebrating their eventual admission into adulthood (Trites, 2000). Notions of liminality as described by anthropologists van Gennep (1909/1960) and Turner (1969) are integrated into the genre's representations of transition (a point I will return to later).

While scholars have identified some of the distinctive German origins that characterise the traditional *Bildungsroman* (Swales, 1978), others point out its pervasive legacy in modern narrative (Frow et al., 2020; Mulhern, 2016) where journeys of growth are present in young adult literature, graphic novels and comics, coming-of-age screen media, and, increasingly, videogames. Frow et al. (2020) rightly note that "It is a form with continuing power" (p. 1907). The developmental themes in *Bildungsromane* have also been remediated within Girlhood Games. Those themes are integral to distinguishing Girlhood Games from videogames that simply feature young women or target girl players. The latter categories were explored in the previous chapter, while here I expand on how transition and development are embedded in Girlhood Games.

Fortunately, Astrid Ensslin and Tejasvi Goorimoorthee (2020) have already laid significant groundwork in interpreting the *Bildungsroman* genre in videogames. They argue that the Campbellian monomyth[2] has been too heavily relied upon to make sense of videogame narratives, finding that the monomyth fails to account for philosophical games with non-heroic themes or non-linear narratives. Maria Tatar (2021) also identifies the monomyth's incompatibility with stories about women, whose acts of heroism, for example, do not always involve leaving the home—while expanding on Joseph Campbell's (1949) misogynistic philosophies on gender. Ensslin and Goorimoorthee (2020) therefore suggest that the *Bildungsroman* is better suited to make sense of what they call "life formation" games. Life formation games, like the *Bildungsroman*, centre on a character's social or psychological growth, yet their interactive form allows players to more actively engage with the character's reflections (Ensslin & Goorimoorthee, 2020).

Bildungsroman structures are applied to life formation games because they privilege philosophical development over Campbellian heroics and stable resolutions. They acknowledge, however, that modern *Bildungsromane* nonetheless frequently retain traditionally fixed conclusions that celebrate entry to adulthood (see also Trites, 2000) or other, ambiguous forms of status elevation, as they identify in games like *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012). Ensslin and Goorimoorthee (2020) instead prioritise their attention towards postmodern subversions of the linear and optimistic

[2] See Joseph Campbells' 1949 publication, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

formulas found in both the monomyth and the traditional *Bildungsroman*. For instance, they conduct an analysis on the life formation game *The Path* (Tale of Tales, 2009), a horror videogame inspired by Red Riding Hood that requires players to veer off the path and explore the woods, only to meet a dreadful fate (Ensslin & Goorimoorthee, 2020).

Ensslin and Goorimoorthee's (2020) paper provides a foundational framework for considering how videogames engage with *Bildungsroman* themes and, crucially, how these may impact the player. They contemplate the player's participation in the game character's philosophical journey as a means of confronting their own developmental experiences: "The player learns more than just the skills needed to master gameplay and instead achieves an advanced form of self-awareness, metacognitive understanding, and/or spiritual and philosophical insight" (Ensslin & Goorimoorthee, 2020, p. 374). My own analyses of Girlhood Games, which may likewise fall into their category of "life formation games," extends Ensslin and Goorimoorthee's endeavour, as I imagine Girlhood Games to be transformative resources for girl players by drawing on feminist politics and representations of resistance.

Irrespective of the *Bildungsroman*, the linking of games to identity formation has long occupied game studies (de Miranda, 2018; Ford Morie et al., 2007; Laurel, 1993; Mortensen & Jørgensen, 2020; Sihvonen & Stenros, 2020). Sherry Turkle, writing in 1995, imagines user performance in online game spaces like multi-user dungeons (MUDs) as possible stages "for self-discovery, even self-transformation" (p. 260):

> Virtuality need not be a prison. It can be the raft, the ladder, the transitional space, the moratorium, that is discarded after reaching greater freedom. We don't have to reject life on the screen, but we don't have to treat it as an alternative life either. We can use it as a space for growth. (p. 264)

Turkle even engages with Turner's (1969) concept of liminality, suggesting that ongoing access to digital thresholds unsettle the liminal moment's fleeting nature, where "living in flux may no longer be temporary" (Turkle, 1995, p. 268). When players *do* exit, as say Molesworth and Denegri-Knott (2007, p. 129), "they do not return from these spaces 'empty handed.'" Many scholars therefore agree that games have the

capacity to impact a player's social and developmental reality. How these potential impacts are realised in Girlhood Games, however, is what I am most interested in for this thesis.

Bildungsroman themes are integral to Girlhood Games, and so I begin my textual analysis chapters with an example of how classic *Bildungsroman* themes are embedded in the game *Oxenfree*. On the one hand, this is useful in identifying how the themes work in a ludic medium, thus shaping expectations for the remaining case studies. Specifically for this chapter, though, identifying classic *Bildungsroman* themes helps to preface the latter part of the analysis as I go on to locate *Oxenfree*'s simultaneous subversions of the *Bildungsroman* structure.

First and foremost, *Oxenfree*'s protagonist and cast of characters are liminal subjects on the cusp of graduation. Their transitory status and the impending uncertainty when faced with key events like graduation are common states for characters in coming-of-age stories. Second, the game narrative takes place on an isolated island setting, emblematic of van Gennep's "separation" phase and thus functioning as a geographically liminal realm. *Bildungsroman* stories often feature liminal settings, particularly when they intersect with the fantastic, where adolescent protagonists experience knowledge and growth while occupying, albeit temporarily, a distinct fantasy space (see Waller, 2009). Third, the characters each face supernatural, social, and identity trials while on the island. These three elements are conventional to *Bildungsroman* and contemporary coming-of-age and young adult media. The latter two elements moreover interconnect with van Gennep's and Turner's framings of liminality, and so will be expanded further.

While occupying the island, the teen characters are untethered from adult and institutional authority. The terrain itself is also alienating, as there are no other inhabitants and also no phone reception; there is only advanced radio technology which is at the same time limiting and old-fashioned. Turner (1969) frames liminality as "ambiguous" and "indeterminate" and hence draws comparisons to notions of "darkness" and "the wilderness" (p. 95). Developing Turner's observations in her work on the modern teen film, Catherine Driscoll (2011) considers the wilderness setting as representing American imaginings of the frontier. Driscoll (2011) relates the frontier's adherence towards self-determination to notions of transition and maturity. The wilderness signifies a "new experience of limits" where "social rules are suspended and

strength of character alone enables survival" (p. 69). *Oxenfree*'s setting and atmospheric tone are strongly characterised by darkness and the wilderness. The abandoned and decaying military facilities, the degraded machinery, the inability to communicate with anybody off the island, combined with the tall, looming, and fairy tale-like trees, and an eerie synth soundtrack, all come together to establish an otherworldly realm utterly distinct from known society.

When occupying the liminal realm of Edwards Island, each teen character, to varying degrees, experiences personal growth when subjected to intense supernatural, social, and identity trials. In *Bildungsroman* stories, trials comprise the series of social, moral, or ethical dilemmas that a protagonist encounters. Initiation trials relate to cultural rituals. Turner (1969) recognises trials to be a core component of initiation rites, subjugated upon a liminal subject prior to their elevation (pp. 169–170). He observes that initiation rites often involve humbling an individual through tests of endurance. He describes, for example, Tsonga initiation rituals, in which subjects are sent from their homes to survive in nature as part of their preparation for adulthood. In Britain, Turner (1969) locates humbling rituals within controversial fraternity and military hazing practices (see also Johnson, 2011).

As a *Bildungsroman* videogame, *Oxenfree* goes on to also represent a series of trials for its teen characters. In an interactive medium though, the game's supernatural, social, and identity trials are shared with the player. To play *Oxenfree*, the player's resourcefulness and problem-solving is called upon. Some of *Oxenfree*'s most playful sequences occur when Alex is "tested" by the island's antagonistic spirits. The spirits tell Alex that their tests are a part of her "training." Alex's social dilemmas moreover allow players to forge close bonds or animosity, or something in between, among Alex and her peers. Alex is finally also confronted with identity trials, which are in part facilitated by how the player chooses for her to react or treat others. These are most intensely portrayed through high-stakes decisions, like when granted the opportunity to prevent her late brother's death while transported to the past. Confronting her grief thus becomes fundamental to Alex's formative journey throughout the game.

Supernatural trials are not essential to coming-of-age fiction, although fantastic genres in general are often interested in adolescent journeys (Waller, 2009). The supernatural trials, however, are central to *Oxenfree*'s heroine's experience. Early in

the game, for instance, Alex and Jonas enter a classroom in an abandoned military facility. During this sequence, and later "testing" sequences like it, the player's wandering is limited to the single frame and their progression beyond is denied until after they passively view and listen to the spirit's interventions.

In these moments, the game's visual normalcy is unsettled: the colour palette is saturated with a glowing filter, static waves obscure the clarity of the scene, and objects in the frame are abruptly moved or removed entirely. The spirits remain unseen, communicating through Alex's radio via words and phrases strung together across different broadcasts—or later, through the voice of a character they elect to possess. The spirits ask Alex, and the player, "Wanna play a game?" after which they are then quizzed on information they may have learned about the island on their way to the classroom. As a timer counts down from ten seconds, the player must answer each question by selecting a multiple-choice option. The sprits, however, speak over the questions and by the third, the screen is rotated upside-down, obscuring the readability of the answers. The familiar anxiety of a classroom quiz is thus made disturbingly unfamiliar and more intense through the supernatural interventions.

In addition to the supernatural trials, *Oxenfree* also integrates social trials into its interactive mechanics, as realised through the player's role in determining Alex's relationships with her peers. In identifying ritual conventions in young adult fiction, Alison Waller (2009) notes that a subject usually must learn to "differentiate themselves from their childhood others (most usually parents) and realign with new relations" (p. 59). Alex's relationship with her recently acquainted step-brother, Jonas, is made rather central to the game. Jonas represents her family moving forward after her brother's passing and her parents' subsequent divorce. In the present, Alex navigates the island with her new step-brother, though she is frequently sent back in time to past island visits with her late brother, Michael. The past and present contexts are hence projections of Alex's internal conflictions, pressing her to confront both her grief for Michael as well as her complex feelings around her changing familial arrangements.

In consideration of the game's social trials then, players can dictate how Alex's relationship with her step-brother Jonas plays out. In the opening sequence when Alex, Jonas, and Ren are on the ferry to Edwards Island, players learn that Jonas and Alex had only met mere hours prior to the game's events. Players are presented here

with the first opportunity to consider Alex's attitude towards Jonas. When Ren asks who Jonas is to her, the player is given three responses to choose from: "A step-brother," "Just some guy," or "A roommate." Throughout the course of the game, Alex continues to be presented with choices that either build upon her relationship with Jonas or maintain distance between them. The game's conclusion then displays a chart that shows whether the player had bonded with Jonas or not.

Finally, and interrelated to social trials, players also engage with several of Alex's identity trials too. As signposted earlier, Alex is frequently sent back in time to past visits on the island with her late brother Michael. In these flashbacks, players are presented with the option to convince Michael to stay in town after his graduation, thus preventing his and Alex's farewell swim which led to his untimely drowning. In these transportations to the past, however, Michael explains his disconnection to their small town and his yearning to experience the outside world. The player is tasked to reflect on whether to discourage his aspiration to leave and in doing so, prevent his death, or to have Alex accept his death and confront her grief. Major choices like this grant players the opportunity to shape Alex's identity by reflecting on morally ambiguous dilemmas. According to Waller (2009), the process of initiation—as presented in fiction—often involves a reconstitution of one's values after they are challenged or threatened (p. 59). The ethical choices posed to Alex thereby signify a challenge to her values, which are ultimately dictated by the player from the beginning of the game. In this sense, the player has a role in the progress of the *Bildungsroman*.

Oxenfree's epilogue overviews their choices, including whether they bonded with Jonas, or whether Michael is now alive, among others not covered in this discussion. The summary of choices may be interpreted as an unconventional and ambivalent scoring system for a set of challenges that ultimately shape the protagonist's "coming-of-age," as referenced in the earlier quote from *Oxenfree*'s creative director. Unlike traditional high scores, the challenges in *Oxenfree* may be better thought of as trials, as they are directly linked to Alex's social and identity formation. Whether their outcome is determined "positive" or "negative"—often colloquially dubbed "good" and "bad" endings—remains up to the player.

Coupled with the liminal status of its adolescent protagonists and the isolated setting of Edwards Island, which I also consider to be liminal, these features are all tied to conventional rites of passage, as understood in anthropology and continued

through the contemporary *Bildungsroman*. It is useful to identify the traditional formulas inherent to the *Bildungsroman* as they are integral to Girlhood Games, and though this thesis is interested in the gendered experiences of girlhood, it is necessary to first establish traditional presentations of initiation and adolescence.

One more *Bildungsroman* convention to be discussed is the linear beginning, middle, and end structure, which also reinforces anthropological observations of initiation rituals. *Oxenfree*, however, departs from this convention. The remainder of this chapter thus considers how the game subverts ideological structures of adolescent development.

Anti-Structural Initiation

Arnold van Gennep's (1909/1960) ritual observations were introduced in the opening chapter of this thesis, although its ties to the Western *Bildungsroman* warrants closer examination. To reiterate: van Gennep (1909/ 1960, p. 11) identifies a three-part formula inherent in transitional ceremonies: preliminal (separation), liminal (transition), and postliminal rites (reincorporation). Human development is among the many transitional rituals that these phases are mapped upon, where the structure is observed across childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. *Bildungsroman* fiction and coming-of-age screen media have since upheld this trajectory through their similarly traditional narrative structures of beginning, middle, and end. This structure tends to then celebrate a subject's overcoming of adolescence.

L. A. Alexander (2013) points out that fiction and popular culture build from community rituals as they convey "recognisable formulas" (n.p.) that symbolic societies deploy to express their ideals. Writing prior to Alexander's linking of fictional formulas to societal organisation, Gayle Greene (1991) suggests that "to draw attention to the structures of fiction is also to draw attention to the conventionality of the codes that govern human behaviour" (p. 99). This in turn exposes those structures for critique. With Alexander (2013) and Greene (1991), van Gennep's rites of passage becomes a useful starting point for exploring the formulas of coming-of-age media, as the communal structures he observes are sustained through contemporary storytelling. Located within significantly numerous works of popular fiction, the

experience of adolescence is ideologically inscribed as a stable, linear trajectory with a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end.

For heroines of coming-of-age fiction, this means that they are usually reincorporated into mature, adult society, usually through their participation in the institution of marriage (Waller, 2009). Despite offering an unreal space for a heroine to thrive, she often must return to the "real world," restore order, or marry and reproduce. These represent acts of postliminal reincorporation that uphold normative gender roles. Such conclusions are most well-known within classic fairy tales adapted by Disney, but they also persist in popular contemporary screen media like Katniss Everdeen featured with her two children in the epilogue of *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay—Part 2* (Lawrence, 2015). Even one of the most well-known *Bildungsroman* protagonists, Harry Potter, concludes his journey grown, married, and sending his own child to Hogwarts (Yates, 2011); an ending that has been described as a "'female' fairy tale ending" for its male protagonist (Guanio-Uluru, 2015, p. 231).

Scholars like Lee Edelman (2004) and Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009) consider how hegemonic normality is expressed through ideals surrounding human development. While they both frame their arguments around the figure of the child and through the lens of queer theory, their discussions around ideological development and forms of resistance are nonetheless present in Girlhood Games like *Oxenfree*. Edelman (2004) writes that the child is metaphorically projected to stand as a symbol of futurity, meaning that they are positioned to sustain the status-quo when they grow up by, for instance, producing their own children. In doing so, they thus ensure the reproduction of the ideaologically structured nuclear family. Implored through cultural materials and governmentality, this fate, Edelman suggests, appears "impossible to refuse" (p. 2). Building on Edelman, Stockton (2009) puts forth the concept of "growing sideways" as an alternative to linear progress. Growing sideways rather refers to the "unruly contours of growing that don't bespeak continuance" (Stockton, 2009, p. 13). Unlike Harry Potter or Katniss Everdeen, Alex is not granted a traditional postliminal fate because she becomes caught in a temporal loop. She might therefore be perceived to be "growing sideways" in place of "growing up."

Other criticisms of linear development have responded to the universalising and conclusive nature of the tripartite structure in coming-of-age texts. Waller (2009)

is one of many who is critical of representing development as a clean three-step process when she writes that "human beings never truly become unified, active or powerful selves" (p. 1). Robyn McCallum (1999) likewise notes that representations of conclusively stable subjects in young adult fiction "offers young readers a worldview" that is problematically "idealistic" and "unattainable" (p. 7). Ebony Daley-Carey (2018) more recently furthers these views when writing that *Bildungsroman* narratives tend to ideologically promote development as "linear, unitary, and essentialist" (p. 468). She therefore looks at instances of contemporary young adult fiction that disrupt that ideology by embracing ongoing fragmentation and evolution of selfhood.

Reflecting these cultural and literary critiques, *Oxenfree*'s timeslips and cyclical conclusion effectively disturb the traditionally linear coming-of-age conclusion, promoting a resistance to normative reincorporation and progress. Victor Turner's (1969) understanding of liminality as an "anti-structure" is hence highly applicable to this reading. Turner draws upon van Gennep's three-part structure and pays close attention to the liminal phase. He characterises the phase as "anti-structural" as it operates in suspension of the structured and regulated realms of the preliminal and postliminal, referred to here as childhood and adulthood. The liminal stage is therefore a potentially liberating site for those occupying the threshold, which I liken in *Oxenfree* to its isolated island setting. The game's timeslips and cyclical conclusion hence signal anti-structural subversions to linear and stable values of development, or as Stockton (2009) would call, "growing sideways". The game's unconventional developmental trajectory stands as a form of resistance for adolescent heroines like Alex.

Oxenfree's Timeslips

Oxenfree's timeslips are a core device in the game that effectively challenge normative developmental temporality. A timeslip is a narrative device wherein a character from the past may appear in the present or a character in the present is transported in time (Cosslett, 2002).[3] *Oxenfree*'s ghostly antagonists are subjects from the island's history

[3] Relatedly, Alison Gazzard (2009) conducts an analysis of "time-warps" in videogames. Time-warps are better understood as a device that sends a player from one point to another, rather than looping them through a singular area as is the case for *Oxenfree*. I have therefore elected the term "timeslip" (via Cosslett, 2002) as it is more appropriately applicable to the case study.

that Alex unintentionally invites to the present when she opens the temporal tear with her radio. In lifting the veil of the island's past, she activates a broader temporal disruption that also transports her back in time where she can revisit moments with her brother prior to his untimely death. As discussed earlier, the timeslips to the past operate as a trial towards Alex's internal development as she negotiates her grief. At the same time, and indeed more conceptually, the timeslips also function to fragment homogenous temporality. In this way, the subversion of time in *Oxenfree* may be read as a ludic articulation of "anti-structural" liminal space (Turner, 1969, p.95).

As Alex and Jonas step off the cable car and enter the "Campgrounds" area of the island, the two experience one of the game's first timeslips. The temporal loop is activated when players progress from the right side of the frame to the far left. As they traverse this space, Jonas prompts a conversation about Alex's past on the island when he asks, "You used to come here a lot as a kid, right?" As they walk beyond an abandoned tent, he then comments that the island would be nice to visit in the summer or spring, to which players have the option to respond that Alex "never again" intends to return. Perhaps these exchanges regarding their past and future relationships to the island provoke the temporal disruption that they are subsequently plunged into, for when they reach the end of the path on the far left, they are sent back to the right of the screen where they stepped off the cable car.

Jonas, ignorant to the timeslip, repeats, "You used to come here a lot as a kid, right?" If players choose to comment on the repetition, Jonas will assure that Alex is experiencing *déjà vu* in response to her numerous memories of visiting the island. They traverse from the right to the left of the frame as before, although this time the image is slightly slanted and the top and bottom of the screen are overlayed with static waves, like a distorted VHS tape. The tent is now also accompanied by a campfire, signalling that they are not merely retracing their previous path but are rather inhabiting a different timeline altogether.

The topic of memories from the island remains the focus of Alex and Jonas's conversation. Jonas worries that the traumatic events of the evening have damaged Alex's relationship to the island, which he believes to be a part of her identity (the player then dictates whether Alex agrees or disagrees with him). As they reach the left side of the screen, Alex and Jonas are again transported back to the cable car where Jonas once more repeats, "You used to come here a lot as a kid, right?" In this

sequence, a soccer ball sits in the centre of the frame and Alex may remark that she had the same ball when she was a child. If players kick the ball, an invisible force sends it rolling back towards them. As the word "fetch" is unsettlingly voiced through Alex's radio, an obscured imprint of a towering shadow is then burned onto a decayed wall behind them.

In the following loop, Alex is by herself. As players pass the lake in the foreground, they will notice that her reflection remains static. The reflection offers the player cryptic advice about a narrative decision they will later take on, referencing whether to interfere with her brother Michael's fate. The advice is in fact from another player who has already played the game. Towards the end of their own playthrough, players in turn appear on the other side of the reflection where they must select their own advice to future players via a multiple-choice option. This online component is threaded frequently throughout the game each time players encounter reflective devices like mirrors, the other side of which they themselves will be eventually positioned.

In the final loop, Jonas has returned and is now conscious of the timeslips. Next to the tent is a new object, a 1940s magnetophon that Alex perceives to be both "super old" and "almost spotless." Players are guided to rotate the controller's right thumb stick—if playing on a game console—to reel the magnetophon in order to effectively conclude the loop. Their success is signalled when the static is removed and clear visualisation is restored. In this frame, assumed to be the present, the burning campfire is absent, yet the figure burned onto the wall remains. Temporal loops similar to this sequence repeat throughout the game, although the player is now aware they need to search for a magnetophon to move on.

I describe this sequence in detail because it represents an abundant and complex merging and obscuring of time. While Alex and Jonas are caught in a temporal loop, it is unclear whether they are simultaneously transported to other timelines or if objects of the past, like the soccer ball and the magnetophon, have entered their present. The ghostly hauntings further converge the island's past and present, while the reflection of Alex's future self obscures the timeline even further. This sequence hence breaks an ample sum of temporal laws. Within this sequence, it is difficult to map or regulate the multilayered temporalities. The only accurate

approach of understanding time in this sequence is by acknowledging its chaotic ambiguity.

Oxenfree's timeslips send its teen subjects backwards, forwards, and through indecipherably merged temporal realities, disturbing normative values of linear progression. Their unfixed position in time mirrors their broader unfixed position as liminal, adolescent subjects. While inhabiting the liminal threshold of the island, the teens are thus freed from the impulses of hegemonic, forward-inclined momentum. The island, in this way, encourages what Stockton (2009) would term "sideways" development, for it does not propel its teen occupants toward their future roles, which Edelman (2004) correlates to upholding the status-quo.

Oxenfree, however, does more than just situate the player passively in chaotic temporal suspension. Players, through Alex, are equipped to also reclaim temporal control through the magnetophon mechanic. Alex moreover takes advantage of her ability to communicate with people from the past to speak to various versions of herself—other players—to offer advice towards the end of the game. That advice appears within another player's game and may then be practically applied. The device's presence in an interactive medium therefore extends the idea of liminal empowerment by granting the player a claim for temporal manipulation. The timeslips therefore do not merely happen *to* the player, but rather they come to learn how to exist, manage, and cooperate with others through these alternative temporal logics.

When the future version of Alex appears in the lake or mirror reflections, she is figured less as Alex the *character* but rather as Alex the *proxy* of another player. During these online moments, the characterisation dissolves so that player identities can be brought to the forefront. The temporal control is therefore reconfigured to belong to the players themselves. The other players' usernames hover above Alex's head in the reflections, and when players are later put in the advisory position themselves, their own online username likewise appears. The visibility of usernames reinforces the players' direct presence and active participation within the game, potentially encouraging greater self-reflective input.

To revisit the conventions of coming-of-age fiction, scholars have noted that classical renditions of the genre present ideologically conservative formulas of subjectivity that celebrate mature unification as the desired, permanent, and irreversible closure of adolescence. Nevertheless, scholars like Amy Bright and

Deborah Wills (2011) and Ebony Daley-Carey (2018) are beginning to identify texts that trouble ideologies of hegemonic linearity and instead endorse post-structural fluidity; see also Cua Lim (2009), who writes on the timeslip's political resistance to modern linear thought in postcolonial fiction. Daley-Carey (2018), for instance, identifies and discusses outlier *Bildungsroman* works that do not present an "overcoming" of adolescence or champion adulthood as a superior or stable end. Relatedly, Bright and Wills (2011) introduce the term "transliminal consciousness," to describe a threshold that "may be crossed in both directions" (p. 106). *Oxenfree* participates in these strategies through its exploration of disordered time and subsequent expression of developmental fluidity.

The game embraces fragmentation through its multiple timeslips that propel its characters, and players, forwards and backwards at the same time. In this way, *Oxenfree's* multilayered timeslips are rhetorically expressive of what Turner (1969) describes as the "necessarily ambiguous" (p. 95) state of liminality. Occupying this ambiguous state, Alex can exert control over her temporality, using the radio and magnetophon technology to manipulate the island's temporal anomalies—a sense of control also shared with the player.

Stuck in the Middle

While the timeslips experiment with alternative temporal realities, they are nonetheless bound to the liminal state: they occur only on the island and there is a presumption that when the teens leave, temporal normality will be restored. The freedoms of temporal ambiguity then, are suggested to only be enjoyed during the liminal stage, which, as I've argued, is geographically represented by the island. However, when the game closes as the teens depart, Alex is transported back to the opening journey toward the island. Regardless of the chosen strategy in overcoming the spirits, players will always return to the beginning of the game. In the closing epilogue, Alex summarises her friends' lives after graduation, yet when it is time to share her own postliminal fate, her dialogue deviates to an explanation of travelling to the island with her high school friends, as if for the first time.

This expresses the possible endurance of liminal affordances, marked by Alex's capable leadership and her ability to move about freely. Players may play the

continued timeline mode of the game, where there is the chance for Alex to warn her past self not to visit the island. Yet despite receiving this message, the "Continue Timeline" option stubbornly remains on the home screen. Its ongoing presence indicates that Alex will never leave the island so long as the player continues to play the game. It is an unconventional meta-device that connects the player's ongoing return to the liminal space of the game with Alex's own lasting liminal status. As the spirits frequently ask, "Is leave possible?" players come to learn that the answer is no. The cyclical fate feeds into the game's supernatural horror themes, but at the same time, it may be read as a release from moving forward in service of the status-quo (a "horror" outcome more rooted in reality).

The postliminal phase marks a girl's readiness to participate in society, but society is a patriarchal and white supremacist system that oppresses people such as Alex, as a girl of colour. The conclusion is therefore subversive because Alex's liminality is never really concluded. She is not propelled into an oppressive system. She is not assigned a hegemonic role like marriage and motherhood. Edelman (2004) and Stockton's (2009) ideas on resisting the future therefore permeate through Alex's fate, whose development no longer appeals to societal continuation. By resisting this conclusion, *Oxenfree* imagines an alternative coming-of-age, where girls' development remains ongoing, unfixed, and ambivalent. It is a state that is charged with liberatory energy. As Turner observes, liminality's anti-structural nature promises a degree of freedom that makes room for playful thoughts, feelings, and actions (1969; 1982; see also Bellas, 2017).

Oxenfree is not an overtly feminist text, although its conclusion nonetheless carries subversion through its dissolution of developmental ideology. Turner (1982) argues that once a liminal subject is separated from societal structure, those structures are subsequently exposed for critique. "Anti-structure," Turner (1982) writes, "can generate and store a plurality of alternative models of living" (p. 33). Alex never forfeits her freedoms—albeit unknowingly and inadvertently—by re-entering adult society. In doing so, the conclusion rejects those ideologies located in *Bildungsroman* tradition that so frequently limit girls' adolescent freedoms to be provisional and fleeting. Alex therefore lingers in a state of continuous possibility, which the player is invited to engage in over and over again each time they play the game and return to the island with Alex.

Oxenfree's Edwards Island is a crucial symbolic ground. It stands as what van Gennep calls the "neutral zone" (1909/1960, p. 18), the location wherein initial separation takes place. The neutral zone is typically unburdened from external influence or industrial intervention and is ordinarily a natural site "where everyone has full rights to travel" (van Gennep, 1909/1960, p. 18). While in the neutral zone, "novices are outside society, and society has no power over them" (van Gennep, 1909/1960, p. 114). For girls in contemporary society, however, such freedoms are not necessarily guaranteed. In the introduction to their edited collection *Girlhood and the Politics of Place* (2016), Claudia Mitchell and Carrie Rentschler explain that,

> girls and young women struggle to assert their rights to territory and autonomous spaces, to represent their experiences of belonging to and relating with others in key spaces of learning, working, playing, consuming, and, as Mary Thomas (2005) argues, hanging out in the city. (p. 2)

Yet at the same time, they implore that placemaking is a crucial process for girls. In this sense, place is a "stage and practice of power" and "the site of great pleasures and possibilities" (Mitchell & Rentschler, 2016, p. 1). *Oxenfree*'s Edward's Island is an example of how fictional spaces can represent the pleasurable possibilities that Mitchell and Rentschler speak of.

The single-player and (mostly) offline digital worlds of Girlhood Games are relatively unregulated spaces for girl players. When playing a Girlhood Game like *Oxenfree*, players are granted the opportunity to practice resilience, resourcefulness, and power, while freely navigating unfamiliar spaces. This logic extends to the narrative world of the game through character roleplay. Alex, for instance, moves about the island in a manner that is more difficult in a patriarchal and white supremacist reality that overpolices girls of colour (Crenshaw, 2015; Restrepo, 2019). In this unregulated realm, Alex is able to thrive regardless of her age, race, or gender. Alex moreover displays personal growth that the player participates in through the supernatural, social, and identity trials discussed earlier. Alex's childhood friend Ren affirms her change when he shares prior to the climactic final sequence:

> I- I wanna get this off my chest, just… something happened to us tonight, Alex, something… broke. I don't know if it was the ghosts or whatever but… you have been acting, like, *not* you.

Alex is assigned the leadership role because she had brought the radio to the island. She therefore takes responsibility for closing the temporal tear that is activated at the beginning of the game. Her role on the island contrasts from Nona's confession that she had failed to notice Alex at school. If players choose to respond sympathetically to Nona's apology, rather than defensively, Alex will admit, "I don't talk all that much so I don't know why you would remember me," implying that Alex's acquaintance with leadership is newfound and that her successfully received authority relates to her actions on the island. In her leadership role, Alex is a resourceful and active agent, and she courageously confronts the hauntings of both her past and the island's ghostly antagonists all while navigating the island without the heroic assistance from her male companions.

The cyclical conclusion means Alex retains these freedoms. Players are thus exposed to the idea that liminal affordances need not be forfeited in adulthood. Temporality is engaged with to communicate these ideas, where the conclusion assures that normative time is never restored, and so favouring the endurance of anti-structure. *Oxenfree*'s protagonist Alex is therefore able to infinitely remain on the margins of structural, societal regulation.

Conclusion

In a sublime sequence of cryptic distortions near the end *Oxenfree*, Alex stands in the centre of a frame surrounded by infinite blackness. While occupying this non-space, the spirits inform her through a fragmented radio transmission, "It is the. Road. Of the Middle." Spoken at the end of the game, this phrase affirms my reading of *Oxenfree*'s rhetoric of adolescent liminality. The game presents the "middled" road—allegorically represented through the island setting—as at once uncertain and even frightening but at the same time empowering in its distinction from the regulatory "real world." While traversing the threshold, Alex is subjected to supernatural, social, and identity trials. She is confronted with dilemmas that call on her, and the player, to reflect upon their

values. A *Bildungsroman* convention among these is the acceptance of death, where the opportunity to manipulate it becomes a tempting possibility. These are examples of how videogames may remediate the tropes of the *Bildungsroman* genre, and I've highlighted in this chapter how these conventions have been inherited from global cultural rituals. Identifying *Bildungsroman* conventions in this first case study is helpful in defining the themes present in Girlhood Games. It also provided the necessary context to discuss how *Oxenfree* then troubles other *Bildungsroman* structures.

This chapter has closely analysed sequences in the game that unsettle hegemonic temporality: *Oxenfree*'s timeslips and its cyclical conclusion. These devices critique structural values of linear, stable, and conclusive development, dissolving ideologies of permanent adolescent departure by fixing its heroine in an infinitely liminal state. The anti-structural playfulness that characterises the liminal phase is thus sustained.

In this way, *Oxenfree* presents a feminist developmental alternative, where its heroine resists emerging from the threshold to participate in regulatory, patriarchal adult society. Throughout this chapter I have argued that when residing within the threshold, girls may experiment with more freedoms than permitted during childhood and adulthood. Similarly, unregulated fantasy worlds also empower heroines to thrive, but as with the liminal phase, the otherworldly realm is usually only temporarily inhabited, to be followed by the heroine's adoption of a normative gender role. Alex, however, is freed from a postliminal fate via the game's infinite temporal loop. She is then able to indefinitely practice leadership, resilience, and free movement.

Girl players too traverse Edward's Island and are hence roleplaying their own performances of resourcefulness, leadership, curiosity, wandering, and resistance. Where the island represents a liminal space for Alex to perform these traits, the game system likewise functions as a liminal space for girl players. Like the island's isolation from society, the game is a separate, relatively unregulated space for rehearsing resistant performances of girlhood. After participating in this Girlhood Game, there is a speculative potential for girl players to then draw on these practiced traits in their own social realities after emerging from the digital threshold. Meanwhile, the game's looping conclusion mirrors girls' potential ongoing access to liminal pleasures in the

digital realm. Girlhood Games like *Oxenfree* are hence a promising resource for girl players' own ongoing and unfixed developmental journeys.

This chapter has introduced the first of this thesis' contemporary Girlhood Game case studies, linking Alex's subversive developmental trajectory to the feminist possibilities available within the liminal realm. These affordances, I have argued, are crucially shared with girl players, who are also entering a playful threshold space when playing the game. The remaining case studies do not strictly deviate from the *Bildungsroman's* beginning, middle, and end, yet they do, in various ways, contribute in presenting alternative and resistant modes of girlhood development.

The following chapter continues to examine resistant temporality in the game *Life Is Strange*, turning from the more generalised trajectories of adolescent development explored here and towards specific discourses surrounding girlhood.

3. Memory and Resistance:

Power Structures, Postfeminism, and Nostalgia in *Life Is Strange*

Introduction

While the threshold space makes room for anti-structural subversion, girlhood is at the same time fraught with troubling realities. In the previous chapter I outlined cultural ideologies surrounding adolescent development. As reflections of culture, Girlhood Games have the capacity to experiment with and indict communal structures, as evidenced through my reading of *Oxenfree*'s subversions of linear and conclusive adolescence. I now turn my attention to the distinct ideologies and discourses surrounding girlhood development. To do so, I take Dontnod Entertainment's *Life Is Strange* (2015/ 2016)[1] as it addresses many of the oppressive structures that establish and enforce desirable girlhoods, while its mechanics reflect strategies for how girls may resist them.

When navigating adolescence, girls are confronted with the realities of their gendered status in a patriarchal world. In the context of twenty-first century postfeminism and neoliberalism in the West, the pressure of practicing approved girlhood is placed upon individual girls, while institutions function to uphold a patriarchal status-quo (Harris, 2004). *Life Is Strange* is a useful case study for looking at how Girlhood Games communicate gendered oppressions and indict the power structures that uphold them. The game addresses contemporary gendered issues through a distinctive form of resistant nostalgia, which is shared with the player through the game's temporal play mechanics. Neoliberal politics, girlhood nostalgia, and resistance come together through the systems in *Life Is Strange,* which tasks

[1] This chapter refers to the 'Limited Edition' of *Life Is Strange* (PlayStation 4 edition), released in 2016, the year following its original episodic release. This edition includes minimal patches from its original episodes and directors' commentary.

players to rewind time, take photographs, and navigate difficult decisions. Analysing *Life Is Strange* through these lenses helps to better understand the transformative potential of Girlhood Games. Moreover, considering nostalgia as a play mechanic deepens our understanding of girlhood in general when thinking through nostalgia's function in navigating patriarchal obstacles.

Like *Oxenfree*, *Life Is Strange* moves away from violence and action and is instead driven by narrative and dialogue systems. The game is a choice and narrative adventure game that was released episodically in five parts in 2015. Players take on the role of Maxine 'Max' Caulfield, a reserved, white, queer, eighteen-year-old high school student. Max reconnects with her former childhood friend Chloe to solve the mystery of their peer Rachel Amber's disappearance. She also mysteriously acquires the ability to rewind time, which the girls use to aid their investigation.

Unlike *Oxenfree*, these temporal manipulations are predominately in the player's control. They are utilised strategically and experimentally to solve puzzles or explore the branches of various dialogue trees. The rewind-mechanic further recalls the concept of transliminal unboundedness explored in the previous chapter. This chapter, however, explores *Life Is Strange*'s temporal manipulations as a resistant mechanism rooted in nostalgia. Nostalgia for a time prior to adolescence is evoked by the gendered realities confronted during girlhood. These are represented in the game as bullying, surveillance, drink-spiking, and gendered violence, as well as several instances of neoliberal politics that will be unpacked later. But rather than engaging with nostalgia as a regressive fantasy, the girls play with time to fight back and rebel against the institutions that attempt to oppress them.

Life Is Strange has received a substantial degree of critical attention. The game's popular press and academic interest has likely been garnered due to its feminine and queer subject matter from within the mainstream triple-A publisher, Square Enix. Art director, Michel Koch, shared that the studio had faced difficulties securing a publisher, where it was frequently suggested that their protagonist be a teen boy instead (Quinlan, 2015). In the director's commentary included on the game disc, the developers explain that they presented the game to possible publishers as primarily "a story about two girls trying to reconnect"—indeed an uncommon theme in traditional mainstream videogames. The game also significantly incorporates objectives that starkly contrast from what players are tasked with in more hegemonic

games. One objective for instance, is to mitigate a quarrel between two of Max's peers by searching for evidence that one is innocent from 'sexting'[2] the other's boyfriend.

Due to its uncommon subject matter for a mainstream game, *Life Is Strange* has garnered a myriad of critical engagement. It has been commonly condemned, for example, for succumbing to the "bury-your-gays" trope (Alexandra, 2018; Chan, 2017; Pötzsch & Waszkiewicz, 2019); a homophobic convention within popular media that denies LGBTQ+ characters—often women—a happy ending, usually through their death. The game has also been criticised for its sacrificial treatment of rebellious women (Butt & Dunne, 2019). Others have approached the game through the lens of queer theory, discussing its non-normative temporality as a political disruption of chrononormative—or heteronormative—ideologies of forward-moving productivity and life progression (Knutson, 2018).[3] Queer theory has also been applied in relation to how the game's archiving features communicate queer identity (Drouin, 2018). Another commentary questions its M 17+ rating recommendation in the United States (it is MA15+ in Australia), arguing that the game's moral deliberations would be beneficial for their adolescent students in reflecting upon their own sense of values (Ewert-Krocker, 2015). I build upon this body of work by situating the game's nostalgic themes to troubling experiences of girlhood. I merge the complexities of nostalgia with discourses regarding girlhood, neoliberalism, postfeminism, and theories on photography.

My discussion first identifies the causes of Max's nostalgia. I present a version of nostalgia affiliated to experiences of girlhood in a context of intoxicating neoliberal politics, social pressure, surveillance, and gendered violence. The remainder of the chapter then considers the game's ludic strategies for expressing Max's nostalgia, that is, how it is embedded into the system as an interactive mechanic for players to engage with. I argue that players wield the game's nostalgic mechanics to reclaim and rewrite Max's present. I then elaborate on the central presence of photography in *Life Is Strange*. Photography is another manifestation of Max's nostalgia, but photography in general functions as a creative avenue for girls' expressive identity formation. Max's camera enables a specifically adolescent exploration of subjectivity, objectivity, and

[2] Participating in explicit text messages.

[3] A term put forth by Elizabeth Freeman (2010) that is not dissimilar to Edelman (2004) and Stockton's (2009) work discussed earlier.

self-expression. Her interest in capturing 'selfies' meanwhile offers a resistant counterpoint to the measures of surveillance occurring around her. I close the chapter with an overview of *Life Is Strange*'s tragic conclusion and a discussion of the various views that read this sequence as undermining Max and Chloe's feminist resistance. I do not intend to contradict or undo these warranted perspectives. I instead emphasise that despite its tragic conclusion, *Life Is Strange* ultimately exposes players to an experience of resilience and rebellion.

Approaching Nostalgia

Derived from the Greek words *nostos*—meaning "to return home"—and *algos*—meaning "pain"—nostalgia is, in essence, a sensation of longing for home. The concept came about in 1688 by Swiss physician, Johannes Hofer, to diagnose homesickness among Swiss soldiers (Boym, 2001). "Home," however, later came to represent more than a geographical location as it was increasingly tied to a particular time period as well. It has therefore been suggested that nostalgia reflects the "sad fact" that the past cannot be revisited, and hence rather functions as a by-product of coping with a complex present (Hutcheon & Valedés, 1998, p. 19). The framing around nostalgia therefore eventually shifted from medical disease to a psychological sentiment (Boym, 2001).

The presence of nostalgia is certainly not obscured in *Life Is Strange*: Max frequently and explicitly laments for the past. Numerous 1980s and 1990s pop cultural references are meanwhile embedded throughout, reflecting the developers' own nostalgia for their adolescent media consumption. Max's geographical return to her hometown seems to initially be the main catalyst for her nostalgia (a more concise summary of the game is provided in the next section). Yet Max's deeper social challenges are soon made apparent, indicating that her nostalgic longing for her hometown has been unmet and that she rather longs for the past itself. The reality of the time and place that one is nostalgic for, however, is often idealised and emerges in response to discontented feelings with the present. As Linda Hutcheon (1998) writes,

> This is rarely the past as actually experienced, of course; it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire. In this sense, however,

> nostalgia is less about the past than about the present [...] The simple, pure, ordered, easy, beautiful, or harmonious past is constructed (and then experienced emotionally) in conjunction with the present—which, in turn, is constructed as complicated, contaminated, anarchic, difficult, ugly, and confrontational. (p. 20)

When the present has become increasingly complex, then the past comes to symbolise simpler times. Accordingly, nostalgia is conjured in *Life Is Strange* when the teen girls are confronted with their complex realities. When investigating their peer Rachel's disappearance, they face what it means to be a young woman within a systemic culture that does little to support or protect them. Nostalgia is moreover instrumental to processes of identity formation. As Fred Davis (1979) describes, nostalgic sentiment accompanies "the never ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities" (p. 31), and thus draws attention to the prevalence of nostalgia in transitional liminal subjects.

In *Life Is Strange*, Max's nostalgic longing materialises through her ability to rewind time but is further explored through her photography. This chapter later considers Max's photography through Susan Sontag (1979) and Roland Barthes (1981), who notably regard photography in conjunction with memory and sentimentality. Sontag (1979) explains that a photograph provides evidence of the past, albeit distorted via the limitations of perspective and framing. The act of taking a photo thus promotes an interest in "things as they are, in the status quo remaining unchanged" (Sontag, 1979, p. 12). The photographer may therefore take on a sentimental role that mirrors nostalgic drives. As a photography student, Max likewise captures fleeting moments, prolonging their existence by transforming them to a material reference; a practice that is shared with the player.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the game *Oxenfree* in order to introduce how Girlhood Games resemble a liminal threshold. *Life Is Strange* likewise represents another digital liminal space, but one that instead draws on nostalgia to establish its transformative potential. As with *Oxenfree,* girl players practice resistance when taking on the role of *Life Is Strange*'s defiant heroine, whose shared actions cultivate a degree of social and institutional critique. In framing nostalgia as its core game mechanic, I argue that the sentiment becomes another lens through which Girlhood Games may invoke reflection and transformation in girl players.

Life Is Strange: Story Summary and Temporal Systems

Life Is Strange takes place in the weeks following Max's return to her childhood hometown, Arcadia Bay, where she had received a scholarship to board at Blackwell Academy. Arcadia Bay is a fictional insular, seaside town in Oregon in the United States. Max attends the town's prestigious private art school Blackwell Academy to pursue her passion for photography. The school boasts a renowned program taught by acclaimed photographer, Mark Jefferson, whom Max personally and artistically admires.

Upon returning home, Max reunites with her childhood friend, Chloe Price. In the years when Max lived in Seattle prior to the game's events, Chloe had formed an intimate friendship and romantic relationship with Rachel Amber, who had gone missing shortly before Max's return. The game follows Max and Chloe's endeavour to uncover the truth behind Rachel Amber's disappearance—and then bring justice to the men responsible for her kidnapping and fatal overdose. The restoration of Max and Chloe's stilted friendship meanwhile plays a central role in the game, as Max failed to maintain contact with Chloe while in Seattle. This was especially trying for Chloe as her father had passed away in an untimely motor vehicle accident around the same time as Max's departure. Players traverse this friendship through dialogue choices that incite varied reactions. The nature of Max and Chloe's relationship is also dictated by the player, where they are offered the choice to pursue a romantic relationship.[4]

One of the game's primary systems is player decisions and consequences. The "butterfly effect"—that a small action may produce a grand impact—is emphasised when a butterfly symbol flutters in the corner of the screen each time players make a decision that will affect a later narrative outcome. Text accompanying the butterfly reads, "This action will have consequences." Players, however, are granted a window to rewind time and alter their decisions, although they are only able to do this at the time of the given sequence and not later in the game when the consequences are revealed.

The other primary system is therefore the rewind mechanic, which is diegetic to the game world. Max discovers her ability to rewind time early in the first episode

[4] Renee Ann Drouin (2018) rightly points out that even if players do not pursue a same-sex relationship with Chloe, Max's queerness is nevertheless affirmed through a diary entry that expresses intent and regret for not kissing Chloe.

after traumatically witnessing Chloe shot dead by another student in a Blackwell Academy bathroom. Max is transported back to her seat in the class that preceded the event, where she is then able to re-enter the bathroom and prevent the shooting. The rewind ability is then used throughout the game to experiment with decisions and to solve various puzzles and obstacles, like lifting a character's keys or sneaking past someone undetected.

Another more peripheral but related system of the game is the option to capture and collect photographs to be then archived in Max's diary. The photography comes to intersect with the game's temporal mechanics when Max later discovers that she can use her photographs to travel to the moment captured. The rewind and photography mechanics are thus interrelated to Max's nostalgia. I consider her nostalgia in light of the deeper difficulties of girlhood in a postfeminist society, particularly in relation to neoliberal politics.

The world of *Life Is Strange* is indeed presented as especially patriarchal, where authoritative male figures compromise the safety of its teen girl characters. The disturbing encounters that Max experiences incite her to initially reject her own coming-of-age by turning time backwards. But the powers also offer a means of artificially crafting an improved future by reclaiming control of an environment that otherwise attempts to disempower young women.

Before elaborating on the themes of nostalgia, time travel, and photography, this chapter first explores the reasons behind Max's mourning of the past. A specific form of feminine nostalgia is presented, informed by girls' confrontations with patriarchal and neoliberal politics. I particularly draw from Anita Harris' (2004) identification of "can-do" and "at-risk" discourses that are projected onto girls. These two categories represent contradictory narratives of girls' ability to succeed; "one of opportunity and choice, and the other of crisis and risk" (Aapola et al., 2005, p. 217). *Life Is Strange* explores the consequences of at-risk girls like Max and Chloe, as well as Rachel, who are each non-conforming, queer, rule-breakers; particularly Chloe and Rachel who outwardly embody punk anti-authoritarian identities. Chloe and Rachel are, in turn, violently cast out of the patriarchal Arcadia Bay. I will also discuss in this section the futility of being a can-do girl with the example of the character Kate. By drawing on these concepts, I present a mode of nostalgia that is related to girls' coming-of-age experiences. In doing so, I build on prior feminist considerations

regarding the productive potential of reflective nostalgia, challenging its historical devaluation as a regressive sentiment.

"Home, Shit Home": A Form of Girlhood Nostalgia

After living in Seattle for five years, Max's return to Arcadia Bay fails to meet the fond expectations of her childhood memories. This section maps out the various disappointments of returning home, as well as the gendered tensions Max now experiences. I reason that these unmet expectations evoke a particular kind of nostalgia for childhood that may be experienced by teen girls.

At Blackwell Academy, for instance, Max struggles to fit in with her peers and to assert her talents in her photography class. One of the opening sequences takes place in a photography class and concludes with Mr. Jefferson advising Max that she is lacking "the courage to share [her] gift with others." The reason Max immediately heads to the bathroom—in the fated scene that triggers her rewind powers—is so that, as she reveals, "nobody can see my meltdown."

The high school, however, is not a space that she formerly inhabited and is hence an unfamiliar zone free from the expectations of her memory; yet it was an experience that she had nonetheless positively anticipated. The player may access Max's personal diary from the menu interface at any time during the game. Here they will find summaries of the game's events and insight into Max's thoughts. Max records her excitement at receiving a scholarship to Blackwell in an enthusiastic entry written prior to the game's events: "If words could dance this would be a rave." Yet upon settling in at Blackwell,[5] players learn of Max's troubles with the school's hierarchical social cliques and their bullying of outsiders. One of the earliest puzzles that players are tasked with involves finding a method of entering the dormitory building when it is intentionally blocked by a group of popular girls. Max reflects in her diary, "I thought it would be easier being back."

Max is equally, if not more, disappointed when she encounters the familiar environment of the Price family home in Arcadia Bay. Max's childhood best friend, Chloe, and Chloe's mother, Joyce, live in the same house that Max frequented as a

[5] The game is set one month after her arrival.

child. Although after five years and the passing of Chloe's father, Max can only manoeuvre the house in mourning. A majority of the gameplay in *Life Is Strange* involves wandering around limited areas and optionally interacting with people and objects. Approaching a person or item available for interaction will highlight it. Selecting that person or object will then activate either a short conversation or a reflective line of Max's inner dialogue. As she manoeuvres the Price family home in episode one, her thoughts are relentlessly nostalgic: "Hey that TV used to be in the living room"; "Man, I remember this furniture. We spent all day painting it blue"; "Oh this is a flashback to youth. Our 'Super Secret Closet Lair'"; "Chloe totally changed her style. I barely recognise her"; "Damn it's the couch! We used to pretend it was a pirate ship."; "I do miss Joyce's cooking"; "[Chloe's father] William used to grill awesome burgers for us. I wonder if he was the last one to use this"; "That took Chloe and me the whole day to draw. It's almost invisible now." Max is thus haunted by her memories.

In episode three, Max travels five years in the past back to the Price family home before the death of Chloe's father. The living room in this sequence is bathed in warm sunlight with the sounds of Chloe and her father conversing cheerfully in the background. This strikingly contrasts from the dim colour palette and quiet stillness of its present-day counterpart in episode one; invoking its uncanny de-familiarisation. In the present-day sequence there are no memorial artefacts for William, yet his memory nevertheless haunts the home where a despairing veil lingers over his surviving family. Chloe is angry and expresses her hurt through rebellion, which in turn obstructs Joyce's ability to move forward with her new husband, David, whom Chloe wholeheartedly rejects. David meanwhile casts a domineering presence over the home which involves the installation of surveillance cameras and an intent to administer violent discipline.[6]

David therefore adds to the house's uncanny atmosphere in the sense that it has indeed become an 'unhomely' environment. Its uncanny figuration lies in conjunction with nostalgic longing because the expectation of a warm familiarity is denied in favour of a harsh present-day reality. In episode one Chloe welcomes Max, "Home, shit home."

[6] David will not hit Chloe if the player chooses to take responsibility for the drugs he finds in Chloe's room. This does not negate his willingness to perpetrate violence.

The bleakness penetrating the girls' present lives has much to do with their adolescent identities. Max for instance, is now experiencing her hometown through a mature lens that was yet to be developed during her childhood. In the book, *Yearning for Yesterday* (1979), Fred Davis considers adolescence to be particularly susceptible to nostalgic sentiments because of its abrupt, transitory conditions. Davis (1979) describes these conditions as "being carried in relatively short order from familiar places and persons to settings that are new, unfamiliar, and thus problematic in crucial respects," therefore designating the life stage as "especially dramatic and well-marked" (p. 57). Davis (1979) in turn links nostalgia to reactive "pleas for continuity" (p. 33).

Davis' work, however, does little to acknowledge a female narrative of nostalgia. He writes that the heightened likelihood of men to be more active in public, professional, and military services suggests they are more likely to experience nostalgia than women, whose lives, he argues, remain relatively domestic and hence more consistent. Davis does, however, acknowledge that at the time of his writing—1979—traditional gender roles were dismantling. He thus proposes that women may, in turn, begin experiencing nostalgia to a greater degree than their "homebound sisters" (Davis, 1979, p. 56). Women are hence imagined to only experience nostalgia when pursuing traditionally male roles.

Theresa Brown (1989) builds upon Davis' comments on nostalgia and gender, linking the sentiment to male desire by drawing on psychoanalytic readings of the Oedipal narrative. She argues that the longing for origins inherent to stories with nostalgic themes (e.g. Homer's *Odyssey*) is reflective of a masculine-coded mythology—informed by Joseph Campbell's (1949) monomyth—and is "inevitably alienating for the female reader" (Brown, 1989, p. 74). Brown considers male narratives of nostalgia as cultural constructions that are both informed by social technologies of gender while also contributing to those gendered technologies (1989, p. 59)[7] and therefore turns to female authors who resist the masculinisation of nostalgia by writing female characters in heroic journey roles. *Life Is Strange* demonstrates this potential through its own girl protagonist whose journey, albeit one that returns her to her hometown, nonetheless involves a series of dramatic events and challenges on par with a hero's narrative. These thematically broad similarities on

[7] Brown (1989) draws on Teresa de Lauretis' (1987) work when discussing gendered technologies; a concept that refers to the cultural practices that construct gendered subjectivities.

their own, though, are not persuasive enough to establish a case for challenging male nostalgia. As Brown (1989) argues through her discussion of *The Wizard of Oz,* the presence of a female protagonist in a monomythic story risks the heroine's status as a proxy in a story otherwise informed by male desire.

It is crucial to recognise that *Life Is Strange* is not a traditionally violent game that has been substituted with a girl hero—the following chapter considers the readings that emerge when this happens. Maria Tatar (2021) argues for the need to reimagine traditional archetypes of heroism—like powerful and violent heroes of war—that have been promoted since ancient and classic stories and cemented through Campbell's (1949) influential structure. Tatar instead identifies alternative heroic actions—like persistence, speaking out, forging alliances, outwitting adversaries—by heroines overlooked by Campbell, such as *The Odyssey*'s Penelope. Just as expanded definitions for heroism are necessary to better account for women's stories, so too are framings of nostalgia.

It is worthwhile then to turn to other feminist perspectives that regard women's multifaceted experiences with nostalgia. Many of these perspectives begin by identifying nostalgia's delineation as an irrational emotion towards the past (McDermott, 2002; Ridout, 2011). According to patriarchal discourses that distinguish women as emotional 'feelers' and men as rational 'thinkers' then nostalgia seemingly ought to belong to the feminine realm. Feminist theorists, however, have called for a revisionist approach towards nostalgia that not only considers women's experiences, but that also challenges its affiliation with regressive delusion. Many of these perspectives—to be summarised below—frame the past as a distanced collective imagining rather than the past of an individual. Nevertheless, their frameworks provide a useful starting point for theorising nostalgia as an avenue for feminist reflection.

Gayle Greene (1991) is among those who relegate nostalgia to regression, stating that its idealising tendencies allude to forgetfulness—that she calls "disabling fictions"—rather than memory, which is relatedly termed "enabling fictions" (p. 289). For Greene, nostalgia represents a complacency with an oppressive past. Similar arguments are raised by Alice Ridout (2011) and Roberta Rubenstein (2001) who both acknowledge the potential intersections between nostalgia and postfeminist backlash, such as backlash against the sexual revolution or in supportive reverence for the home.

According to Greene (1991), unlike nostalgia, memory can be critically excavated to foster feminist consciousness, or "re-membering," which is crucial, she argues, to improving the present and future (p. 300). Sinead McDermott (2002) asks, however, "Is it really possible to mine the past or look to it as a source of change, without at some point engaging in nostalgic longings?" (p. 391). In this chapter, I similarly follow McDermott's (2002) reluctance in separating memory and nostalgia.

Greene's treatment of memory's transformative potential has since been frequently extended by others to include nostalgia. McDermott (2002), for example, relates nostalgia to recovering and confronting traumatic pasts, writing that "remembering can be a form of resistance to the erasure of women's lives and of domestic histories of abuse within patriarchal discourse" (p. 394). Rubenstein (2001) meanwhile emphasises the female nostalgist's grief for the irretrievable. Rubenstein suggests that nostalgia allows women to "confront, mourn, and figuratively revise their relation to something that has been lost" to achieve a stable sense of who they are and how they belong (2001, p. 6). Ridout (2011) proposes that nostalgia enables women to resist capitalism's relentless drive towards the new. Nostalgia may instead establish room for reflection upon the "costs and benefits" of women's contemporary status against the backdrop of postfeminism (Ridout, 2011, p. 25; see also Pickering & Keightley, 2006).

These approaches all consider a reflective version of nostalgia that is linked to critical consciousness. They in turn influence my own framing of nostalgia as a reflective device that resonates with the grapplings of girlhood. While they mostly reference broader social movements when considering nostalgia as a response to transition, I seek here to instead merge nostalgia's relationship with social change with the transitional experience of liminal subjects. In doing so, I extend Davis' (1979) acknowledgement of adolescents' aptness for nostalgia by focussing specifically on the patriarchal conditions confronted during girlhood.

This form of self-reflective nostalgia raises consciousness of contemporary gendered politics, particularly postfeminism. But it does not do so, however, by strictly comparing postfeminist politics to other feminist movements. It is rather about the comparison of one's relatively less gendered childhood status within a contemporary context. This approach accordingly allows for a more open body of theoretical engagement that merges ideas across various waves of feminist thought.

This is important because the feminine coming-of-age conditions that evoke nostalgia for childhood do not start and end with postfeminist dialogue. Trans-historical notions of gendered consciousness come to light during adolescence, significantly contributing to a girl's nostalgia for childhood. To overview this cross-generational experience, it is useful to engage with the influential feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir, for her observations of traumatic feminine adolescence in the mid-twentieth century remain powerfully meaningful. Beauvoir's foundational work *The Second Sex* (1949/1972) includes a chapter titled "The Formative Years." Influenced by psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and existentialism, she overviews a number of conditions that cause pain and distress for adolescent girls.

Beauvoir (1949/1972) famously opens the chapter with the statement, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p. 295). She then distinguishes childhood as a comparatively contented life stage because gendered concerns become more conscious through adolescence.[8] Beauvoir argues that during adolescence, girls are confronted with unfamiliar experiences, from courtship and sexual objectification, domestic duties, uncomfortable changes to the body, and the increasing awareness of women's secondary status in society. While she interprets this consciousness as crucial to the development of girls' agentic subjectivity, the picture Beauvoir (1949/ 1972) paints is rather bleak:

> There is a contradiction between her status as a real human being and her vocation as a female. And just here is to be found the reason why adolescence is for a woman so difficult and decisive a moment. Up to this time she has been an autonomous individual: now she must renounce her sovereignty. […] Oscillating between desire and disgust, between hope and fear, declining what she calls for, she lingers in suspense between the time of childish independence and that of womanly submission. (pp. 359–360)

[8] Childhood, though, is not framed as exempt from gendered conditioning. On the contrary, Beauvoir identifies a number of strategies deployed to encourage appropriate femininity in younger girls, from forbidding rough play to dressing in restrictive clothing. She suggests that as children, girls are less bothered by the privileges granted to their male peers as their understanding of gendered inequality develops as they mature. Beauvoir (1949/1972) writes that as a child, the girl "knows as yet only her childhood universe, her mother at first seems to her to be endowed with more authority than her father; she imagines the world to be a kind of matriarchate" (p. 310).

Jack Halberstam (1998) also discusses girls' oppressive adolescence by comparing it to male rites of passage:

> If adolescence for boys represents a rite of passage (much celebrated in Western literature in the form of the bildungsroman), and an ascension to some version (however attenuated) of social power, for girls, adolescence is a lesson in restraint, punishment, and repression (p. 6).

More recently, Sara Ahmed (2017) echoes Beauvoir's language of "becoming" a girl, which she observes to involve "becoming wary of becoming in public space; becoming wary of being at all" (p. 26). Coming to terms with this knowledge has the potential to ignite feminist consciousness (Ahmed, 2017, p. 27). Though I argue that this knowledge may also possibly incite nostalgic feelings for childhood. As I show throughout this chapter, however, these two outcomes are intricately related.

This kind of nostalgia is a distinct form that significantly represents a need to address the concept's historicised inattention to girls and women. Building on Beauvoir's observations, theorists concerned with postfeminist politics draw attention to a contemporary set of behavioural expectations upon young women, as signposted earlier. Anita Harris (2004) identifies two contradictory subject positions imparted by postfeminist discourses: "can-do" and "at-risk." These two constructions are not presented as factual binary realities but are rather ingrained cultural perceptions in which girls must negotiate their behaviour (Aapola et al., 2005, p. 217). "Can-do" refers to the opportunities presumed available to girls in Western late modernity. A "can-do girl" though, is representative of capitalist neoliberal ideology: there is little to impede her success if she makes the right choices, consumes the right products, works hard, and maintains a positive attitude (Harris, 2004).

"At-risk" girls, meanwhile, are inversely perceived to be vulnerable to less-opportune circumstances, where usually their communities (often determined by class or race) are blamed for their upbringing (Harris, 2004). Yet at-risk girls are also subjected to the neoliberal society that holds them accountable for their failures. The 'girlpower' culture that affords can-do girls the opportunities and confidence to succeed can be "taken too far" by girls who are *too* assertive, *too* sexual, or not feminine enough (Harris, 2004, p. 28).

Foreshadowing Harris' at-risk positioning, therapist Mary Pipher (1994) published a book that was to be a source for parents on how adolescent girls of the 1990s had become victims of contemporary Western culture. In her work, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls,* Pipher argues that despite second-wave feminist movements, girls in the 1990s were experiencing exceptionally difficult formative years. The title refers to Ophelia's self-drowning in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, drawing parallels between the adolescent character's suicide and the "destructive forces" that impede contemporary young women (1994, p. 20). Pipher (1994) views America as "a girl-destroying place," (p. 44) where sexual objectification in the media has intensified and assault and trauma are "at an all-time high" (p. 28). Pressure to conform to feminine ideals further advance girls' social and self-crises, leading Pipher (1994) to present contemporary young women as especially susceptible to *disorientation* and *depression* (p. 22).

Pipher thus launches a dialogue that is influential to Harris' "at-risk" category, although Pipher treats the concerns on an actual and individualised basis, promoting an industry out of "saving" young women by enlisting parents, teachers, and counsellors to survey their behaviour (Harris, 2004, p. 32). Harris meanwhile emphasises the constructivist nature of her two positionings, distancing these imaginings from their lived applicability.

Pipher's approach has received critical responses from other feminist girlhood theorists. Athena Bellas (2017) writes that Pipher's work forms "an assumption about the feminine image and the feminine spectator as necessarily devoid of any capacity for political or critical engagement," positioning girls as "powerless dupes spellbound by an intoxicating yet inauthentic image" (p. 91). As Chloe sternly informs her mother in episode two: "Nobody needs to rescue me." Additionally, Marnina Gonick (2006) suggests that Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* problematically endorses cultural practices and policies of neoliberalism in its calling of individualistic solutions. According to Gonick (2006), the girl in crisis "is at risk of failing to produce the required attributes of the neoliberal feminine subject" and as such, represents a "threat to the new social order" that can only be remedied by individual pursuits of self-improvement, thereby deflecting attention from systemic oppression (p. 15).

Gonick (2006) argues that Pipher's work shares attributes with the seemingly contradictory "girl power" movement because of its emphasis on the individual.

Gonick's (2006) exploration of girl power and the girl in crisis mirrors the dichotomy of "can-do" and "at-risk" identified by Harris (2004). In the same way that Harris (2004) rejects a "divisive interpretation of brave resisters versus passive victims" (p. 146), Gonick (2006) proposes that notions of girl power and the ideas raised in *Reviving Ophelia* operate in unity rather than opposition "to articulate a complex of fiction and fantasy, regulation and persuasion" (p. 2), centred on neoliberal politics.

Beauvoir, Pipher, Harris, and Gonick identify with varying degrees perspectives of girlhood that are fraught with troubling pressures on young women, from the realisation of their secondary status to neoliberal pressures. If childhood is a comparative utopia, then is it any wonder that adolescent girls express nostalgia? Chloe's mother Joyce perhaps best summarises this comparison when she shares with Max a photograph of her daughter as a child: "This was when my baby was so full of life and light. She was hopeful, positive… everything she's not today."

The patriarchal presence in Arcadia Bay is certainly made apparent to Max when she returns at eighteen years old. A powerful businessman, Sean Prescott, controls the town through coercion and intimidation. Blackwell Academy's Principal Wells prioritises the protection of Prescott's violent son, Nathan, over the welfare of his students, fearing Sean Prescott's threats to withdraw donations to the school. Wells does not take the recommended actions to handle Nathan's aggression, nor does he inhibit or investigate Nathan's dubious 'Vortex club' parties that are held on campus and are increasingly found to be unsafe for female students. Nathan is also the student responsible for shooting and killing Chloe in the bathroom in episode one mentioned earlier. If players choose to report that he had brought a firearm to school, they will learn early in the game that male violence is not taken seriously in Arcadia Bay, as Principal Wells will in turn defend the Prescott reputation and warn Max of the gravity of her accusation. Players then have the option to rewind and recant their decision to report, as it is implied that negative consequences may follow. Meanwhile, Chloe's home is also subjected to a strict patriarchal law when her mother remarries ex-military soldier, David, who is willing to enact violent discipline upon his stepdaughter and installs a home security system to regulate her actions.

The culture at the school is also unsafe for women, expressed clearly through the minor character Kate. Max's friend Kate features in a viral video from one of Nathan's parties; a night she no longer recollects. Kate assumes correctly that her

drink was spiked. She is in turn cruelly bullied for the video, which is representative of peer "slut-shaming." This is a gendered form of bullying that shames girls and women for demonstrating desire or participating in sexual activity. It is gendered because it exposes a set of behavioural regulations that are not equally applied to men. Kate consequently suffers from severe depression, and the relentless bullying eventually leads her to take—or attempt to take—her life, depending on the actions and dialogue choices of the player.

Kate's attempted or enacted suicide is in part a consequence of receiving little support from the adult figures around her. In addition to Principal Wells' unwillingness to discipline Nathan Prescott—whom Kate recollects to have been involved on the night—players can also eavesdrop on a conversation between Mr. Jefferson and Kate, where Jefferson responds to Kate's pleas for help by accusing her of acting "brittle." Jefferson accuses, "maybe this is your way of getting attention," reflecting the degree of culpability placed on girls. If players choose to confront him about the conversation, he will continue to reposition the blame onto Kate: "What if Kate brought this on herself?"

The option of seeking support from the town's law enforcement is also presented as futile. Players are given the option of advising Kate to either talk to the police or to attain proof first. If players select to report the incident, Max will additively caution, "We're still just spoiled punk students to the cops and faculty" and that "the Prescott's are a powerful family." On the contrary, if players advise Kate against going to the police Kate will lament, "You make me feel so hopeless." This sentiment is affirmed later in the game when players have the option to manoeuvre a dialogue tree with an officer at the diner who describes Chloe as a "handful." If players choose to disagree, Max will explain that Chloe has had bad luck, to which the officer will respond, "You have to create your own good luck," mirroring Jefferson's deflection of responsibility upon the girls themselves. By manoeuvring through the dialogue mechanics, the game system positions players to experience the futility of patriarchal power structures.

Most disturbing is that Kate's loss of memory from the evening is part of an on-going collusion of dosing unknowing girls, led by the photography teacher Mr Jefferson with the aid of Nathan Prescott. Through investigating the truth behind Rachel Amber's fate, Max and Chloe eventually find that Mr. Jefferson has been

guiding Nathan to spike his female classmates' drinks at his parties before transporting them to a remote subterranean photography studio referred to as the "Dark Room." Jefferson then photographs the girls in their vulnerable states. Chloe and Max find evidence that Rachel was one of their victims who succumbed to an overdose; her body buried in the town's junkyard.

While Max has returned to her hometown, her fonder memories of childhood appear lost. Max now perceives the town through a mature lens that recognises the darker difficulties of living as a young woman in Arcadia Bay. Ahmed (2017) relates this realisation to "gender fatalism" (p. 25), where one's assigned gender decrees their future. In this context of girlhood, gender fatalism communicates "the violence directed against you as forgivable and inevitable" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 26). There is a form of nostalgia presented in the game then that is specific to the troubles associated with girlhood; from unsupportive patriarchal institutions, neoliberal politics, gendered double standards, and gendered violence. This form of nostalgia is not necessarily associated with a place as it is for a life stage, being childhood or early adolescence,[9] where life is imagined to be simpler and safer. The girlhood nostalgia described here reflects the feminist considerations of nostalgia overviewed earlier in this section, as it is tied to Max's conscious sense of disempowerment. I build upon these viewpoints by situating her nostalgia as a response grounded by the difficulties of girlhood.

By repositioning nostalgia to occur after the homecoming event and associating it with the politics of girlhood, *Life Is Strange* challenges nostalgia's association with masculine adventure or regressive delusion, providing a space for its role within a reflective feminist context. Through this interpretation, the game can be seen as a tool to build on prior understandings of gender, nostalgia, and girlhood more broadly. The discussion also points to how games themselves can also be read as commentaries of girlhood. Ultimately, Max's rewind powers demonstrate how the past can be harnessed to improve the future. The remainder of this chapter expands upon the enabling potential of this form of nostalgia by looking at its medium-specific mechanics more closely and the way the players' own structural defiance is potentially cultivated.

[9] Max was thirteen when she left.

Rewriting the Present

Videogame systems are effectively utilised in *Life Is Strange* to communicate how girlhood nostalgia can be harnessed in a transformative way. While the narrative of *Life Is Strange* draws attention to patriarchal power structures, the game's rewind mechanics provide a tool for girl players to actively participate with the characters' resistance. *Life Is Strange* integrates Max's ability to reverse time into its diegetic narrative world, while allowing players to control her power by pressing and holding a button. To formally delineate the game's temporal functions then, *Life Is Strange* features both "gameworld manipulation"—player-controlled reversal of time—and "fictive time manipulation"—narratively inscribed time travel—in accordance with José Zagal and Michael Mateas' (2010) taxonomy of videogame temporalities. As outlined in the introduction of this chapter, *Life Is Strange* also deploys time travel for players to solve puzzle-like obstacles, as well as to experiment with dialogue trees and narrative decisions. Thematically, as I've argued throughout this chapter so far, it expresses Max's deep longing for her past, when, as she writes in her diary, "life was simple."

David Lowenthal (2015) speaks of time travel as an alluring temptation craved by the nostalgic, suggesting that is likely related to its impossibility. Fantasies of time travel meet a variety of nostalgic longings, Lowenthal (2015) argues, from reliving past experiences, visiting foreign eras, to the desire of altering the past to better the present (p. 63).[10] The endeavour to alter the past to 'fix' the present is instrumental to the way Max utilises her time travelling abilities. In this way, her powers incite critical reflection, her past hence functioning as what Greene (1991) would term an "enabling fiction" for coping with the present (p. 298). By this I mean that Max's constant turning to the past—a comparative utopia—reflects a consciousness of her position as a maturing young woman in a patriarchal world.

In the process of identifying these issues, Max retreats to the past before going on to *rewrite* her present. Her retreats to the past may initially indicate a rejection of

[10] Nostalgia for the past is not limited to a person's personal history. Previous eras constructed by collective memory and historical and heritage discourses establish what Gil Bartholeyns (2014) describes as a fantasised notion of "the halcyon days" (p. 54). Bartholeyns applies this concept to the intentional ageing of photographs through digital filters as a means of creating a mythical or authentic effect, while Clare Birchall (2004) suggests that generalised concepts of an older past may evoke nostalgia for a romantic pre-modern way of living centred on community and conservative values.

her maturation—an action that I presented in the previous chapter to be a means of feminist resistance. Max, however, harnesses her knowledge of the past to rewrite the conditions of her girlhood, defiantly declaring her own terms.

Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley (2006) suggest that nostalgia indeed arises in "a loss of faith in progress" (p. 920). They refer here to general notions of modernity, although it is not difficult to extend their ideas to the troubling aspects of postfeminism outlined earlier, which is intricately tied to capitalism's own infatuation with progress. Indeed, as Harris (2004) suggests, "the gains of feminism and the needs of contemporary capital have made an unlikely alliance [...] because, courtesy of feminism, [young women] are the ones who are supposed to be most sold on the message of self-invention" (p. 178). This does not necessarily translate to girls being granted more freedom, but rather, as Harris (2004) continues, "[t]he creation of space and opportunities for young women has also signalled a new interest in observing, monitoring, and regulating them into preferred subject positions" (p. 178). The "girls' games" discussed in chapter one, for instance, fall into this notion, where girls are invited into computing but only via products that uphold rigid definitions of femininity (Kearney, 2015). Harris (2004) hence perceives capitalist modernity and the romanticisation of individualised success, which she labels "responsibilization," to be converging components of postfeminism.

Pickering and Keightley (2006) go on to suggest how nostalgia might therefore take on a subversive role:

> Nostalgia can then be seen as not only a search for ontological security in the past, but also as a means of taking one's bearings for the road ahead in the uncertainties of the present. This opens up a positive dimension in nostalgia, one associated with desire for engagement with difference, with aspiration and critique. (p. 921)

Driven by a "loss of faith in progress" (Pickering & Keightle, 2006, p. 920), nostalgia may thus lead to powerful critical consciousness.

To map these ideas onto a ludic system, *Life Is Strange* embeds temporal mechanics for players to navigate the game's obstacles, while many of those obstacles are coded as patriarchal. Pickering and Keightley's (2006) association of nostalgia

with "aspiration and critique" is hence central here, as Max utilises her relationship with the past to improve or face obstacles within her present.

Her abilities moreover represent a particularly adolescent desire to alter decisions during a period of newly-acquainted independence and moral development. As writer and middle-school teacher, Nate Ewart-Krocker (2015) comments,

> The most teenage thing about *Life is Strange* is Max's gift, the ability to take action and safely observe what the world's reaction will be, knowing that if you've overstepped a boundary, you may freely rescind your decision. The freedom from immediate consequence makes it the most adolescent power fantasy of all. (para. 16)

In *Life Is Strange*, players can rewind time at almost any point in the game, not only when it is narratively required to progress. In practice, the rewind feature is utilised in both casual interactions and tense time-sensitive, high-stakes scenarios. Some of the casual interactions involve manipulating dialogue trees in a trial and error manner in order to gain the trust or social approval of Max's school peers. Other major uses involve mitigating interactions, mostly with male characters, where the outcome's success is indicated by the least amount of violence. In episode one, if David hits Chloe after finding marijuana in her bedroom, players can rewind and confess that it instead belongs to Max, avoiding harm befalling Chloe but placing Max's Blackwell scholarship at risk.

Later, in episode four, players must manoeuvre a sensitive dialogue tree with the town's hot-tempered narcotics dealer Frank Bowers. Certain dialogue choices lead him to violently threaten Max and Chloe with his knife and for his dog to emerge from his RV and attack the girls, prompting Chloe to harm or kill Frank or his dog in self-defence[11]. In both of these sequences, it is encouraged, but not compulsory, for players to repeat the conversation until a non-violent scenario is achieved. For instance, Chloe's traumatic response to injuring or killing Frank implies a preferable outcome may be reached: While standing over Frank's body, Max contemplates, "[Chloe will] never forgive herself… or forget this… And only I can change it." After rewinding to before the encounter, Max can then warn Chloe to remain calm, so as not to provoke

[11] Prior player decisions determine whether she has access to a firearm.

Frank, or to be rid of her gun. If players advise Chloe against taking her gun into the exchange, she will concede and then reply, "Girl, if I need that gun, you better rewind fast," showing how by the penultimate episode, Max's rewind powers are counted on to avoid danger.

In addition to mitigating interactions with violent men, Max utilises her rewind powers to also resist their surveillance. These are in "stealth" sequences, where the player must move from one space to another without being detected. One of these sequences is in episode three, when David, who works as a security guard at Blackwell, determines to catch Chloe and Max in the school's swimming pool after hours. Players must manoeuvre through the darkened locker room to exit the gym, using the rewind feature to avoid his detection. Later, in episode five, the skills learned from this sequence are needed during Max's nightmare sequence, where she navigates surreal appropriations of the game's settings as they are patrolled by Jefferson, David, Principal Wells, Nathan Prescott, Frank Bowers, her friend Warren, and the school's janitor Samuel. The men each hold flashlights and players must avoid the detection of their beams. The rewind mechanic is needed to progress these sequences: as a pursuer draws near, rewinding works to fix Max in place while the pursuer is relocated to where they patrolled moments earlier; ideally now at a safe distance for the player to keep moving.

Max's transformative utilisation of her rewind powers is most clearly conveyed when used to achieve justice for Rachel Amber. The temporal manipulations are crucial for gathering evidence into her disappearance throughout the game, used for instance to lift Frank Bowers' RV keys without his notice, and to break into Principal Wells' office. The player is directly involved in the investigation, particularly in episode four when their problem-solving skills are invoked to piece together and decode the gathered clues. In episode five, however, Max is captured and held against her will in Jefferson's Dark Room. David enters to rescue her, but the game subverts the benevolent saviour motif as his rescue is dismally ineffective. He is immediately shot by Jefferson and players must rewind time over and over again to warn David of each of Jefferson's attacks.

Max's only means of escaping is through her temporal powers, using the photographs in the room to travel to different times. She eventually travels back in time far enough to safely ensure Jefferson's arrest before her kidnapping takes place.

While Max does not have the means to prevent Rachel's death, she does bring justice to those responsible, while writing over her own grim fate inside Jefferson's Dark Room. Throughout the game she also rewinds several times to prevent Chloe from dying, including when shot by Nathan in episode one, by an oncoming train in episode two, and by Jefferson in episode four. Max's temporal abilities ultimately prompt her to contemplate how she might rewrite her own present. In episode four she reflects, "Who ever said we only have a single fate?" The notion of "gender fatalism" (Ahmed, 2017) and its inevitable violences are hence powerfully contested.

Each of these scenarios situate the player in a relatively unique position for a mainstream game. They are threatened with violence or unwanted detection, yet *Life Is Strange* is not a violent action game that empowers its players with 'hardcore' notions of similarly violent retaliation. In other words, Max cannot shoot, stab, or fight her way through the various threats or obstructions. Max's mode of resistance is her ability to recall the past. While nostalgia may not be explicitly referenced in these sequences, Max's relationship with the past is always present.

Reflecting on the past assists Max in critically addressing her present discontents, where she harnesses her memory to reclaim what she has lost over time. One memory she repeatedly remarks upon is her and Chloe's pirate roleplaying games when they were children. Max and Chloe successfully restore their sense of adventure and rule breaking, reigniting their rebellious spirits into their investigation of Rachel's disappearance. The girls engage with Max's rewind powers in a playful way too, creating games out of it in the diner and the junkyard when experimenting with its limits. They accordingly refer to themselves as superheroes. Max contemplates her joy in spending time with Chloe in the junkyard:

> It actually feels like Chloe and I are kids again, we're hiding out and plotting our future… Despite all the chaos and bullshit, I feel so giddy hanging out with her again… So happy… Like we've both gone back in time.

This statement firstly points to Max's recognition that reclaiming the past has a role in determining her happiness. But significantly, it also attests to the empowering potential of her past recollections. Max restores pleasure and empowerment to her present by reconnecting with her lost past. Chloe meanwhile also notices Max's personal liberation. Like Ren commenting on Alex's growth in *Oxenfree,* Chloe

observes, "Your power is changing everything, Max. Especially you. [...] You're becoming like this force of nature."

Harris (2004) notes that girls have established "new modes of resistance" (p. 146) in response to their increased governmentality. Max's nightmare sequence, for instance, explores the oppressive impacts of surveillance in girls' lives, yet as a videogame obstacle, players are offered the tools to evade it. Harris (2004) goes on to write that "many young women, and particularly those deemed to be at-risk, are engaged in projects of rebuilding a public sphere, inserting themselves and their critiques into public space on their own terms, and creating their own communities for evading regulatory regimes" (p. 147). Max and Chloe's junkyard haven described above is a liminal space that is free from public scrutiny, where the girls empower one another to reconnect with their youthful pleasures. From the players' perspective, the narrative space of the junkyard shares the potential of the game space itself, as both are what Harris (2004) might deem "creative mechanisms of resilience and resistance that may ripple out into wider possibilities" (p. 147). This extends to the diegetic rewind powers, which are shared ludically with the player as a core game mechanic. The player therefore actively participates in Max's temporal reclamations and societal dissent.

The rewind mechanics moreover involve the player in unsettling Max's trajectory towards postliminal adulthood. If the process of attaining maturity involves forward, linear progression, Max's rewinding demonstrates a rejection of her coming-of-age. In this way, *Life Is Strange* also disrupts Arnold van Gennep's (1909/1960) three-part trajectory of transitional passage—preliminal, liminal, and postliminal, to which I've been correlating to childhood, adolescence and adulthood. In the previous chapter, I identified the empowering qualities of adolescent liminality and described how *Oxenfree*'s heroine rejects conclusionary incorporation into adulthood in order to remain infinitely liminal. *Life Is Strange* rather draws attention to the patriarchal conditions that may impede these liminal freedoms, incorporating temporal manipulations as a means of navigating them.

While *Oxenfree*'s Alex indeed faces dangerous conditions, the isolated and open-to-explore island setting emphasises an anti-structural freedom that contrasts from Arcadia Bay, which is more grounded in reality's oppressive structures. Even though Max and Chloe carve out their own separate spaces for themselves, these

spaces are nonetheless intruded upon. Their junkyard haven becomes unsafe when Frank Bowers enters to demand money owed by Chloe in episode one, and the space is ultimately defiled when Rachel's remains are discovered there in episode four. Even the girls' bedrooms that would ideally represent a safe sanctuary are intruded upon, where David forcibly enters Chloe's room, and where Max's dormitory is vandalised with threats from Nathan Prescott—if the player chooses to report his weapon. The presence of oppressive forces in *Life Is Strange*'s settings distinguish its presentation of adolescence to *Oxenfree*'s, despite both games' temporal unboundedness. *Life Is Strange* does not lock its protagonists in infinite liminality in a space separate from society. Through its rewind mechanics, it rather harnesses nostalgia for the past to *reclaim* liminal freedoms within a context otherwise difficult and dangerous for young women. Reading nostalgia in this way departs from general trends that view nostalgia as inherently regressive. For players of *Life Is Strange*, the rewind mechanic becomes a possible avenue to defy the status-quo and contest injustice within the digital threshold of the Girlhood Game.

Framing the Self (By Taking Selfies)

One more major system tied to nostalgic resistance in *Life Is Strange* is its engagement with photography. One of the clearest manifestations of Max's nostalgic longing for the past is in episode three when she travels back in time five years using a photograph as a doorway. This occurs during a cut scene where Max mournfully regards a photograph of herself and Chloe when they were thirteen. The photo was taken by Chloe's father shortly before Max left Arcadia Bay.

In the cut scene, Max hears voices from the captured scene and players are then instructed to "focus" on the photograph. The photograph is enlarged to fill the screen, though the image is blurred. Players must adjust the controller's left and right thumb sticks (on PlayStation 4) to bring it into focus. When the image becomes clear, players are then transported to when the photograph was taken; the era that Max has been longing for since her disappointing homecoming. This sequence represents an intense and inextricable affiliation between photography and nostalgia, memory and longing, which has been notably discussed by influential theorist Susan Sontag (1979). Sontag (1979) writes that "like the collector, the photographer is animated by a passion that,

even when it appears to be for the present, is linked to a sense of the past" (p. 77). Although the photograph in this sequence was not captured by Max herself, her attachment to the artefact and her own participation in the medium nevertheless reflects Sontag's statement.

Max's reverence and passion for photography merges with her supernatural power to control time. This response might then be indicative of Roland Barthes' (1981) photographic *punctum*; a term he applies to describe when a photographic detail "pricks" or "bruises" (1981, p. 27) a viewer with emotional intensity. Like Sontag, Barthes (1981) reflects upon photographs representing past moments or events. He applies the term *Ça-a-été*, meaning "that-has-been." Unlike Sontag though, Barthes (1981, p. 85) resists a correlation of photos with nostalgia. Yet he nonetheless proposes that a photograph affirms a past reality that has indeed been distorted by the perspective of the photographer. In this way, an implication between photography and nostalgia may be drawn, as memories too become distorted through romanticism, selective omission, or other such limitations that mirror the confines of a photographic frame.

Barthes rather places emphasis upon the personal reactions that photographs evoke. He identifies two kinds of responses to a photograph; the *studium* and the *punctum*, mentioned above. The *studium* refers to the cultural knowledge that informs the photograph's signifiers; "the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions" (Barthes, 1981, p. 26). The *studium* is a response grounded in knowledge of function rather than emotion, evoking what Barthes (1981) describes to be "unconcerned desire," of "liking, not of loving" (p. 27). The *punctum* meanwhile resonates on a deeper, more personal level with the observer. It is an emotional affect (Barthes, 1981, p. 27). Barthes suggests that the *punctum* is usually a smaller, seemingly inconsequential detail of a photograph, whose personal impact and lingering presence in one's conscience lies in the imagination or background of the observer.

The scenarios that Barthes (1981) describes, however, almost always present the photographer and the observer as two distinct subjects. This limits an application of his work to a text like *Life Is Strange* where the photographs are predominantly taken by Max—through the player. Yet the concept of the *punctum* is especially significant to Max's engagement with the medium, for Barthes (1981) identifies the

sentiment of mourning as one of the photograph's key provocations. Regarding the photograph as a referent for "that-has-been," Barthes (1981) situates the image in conjunction with death. He explicitly states that "the return of the dead" is indeed a "rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph" (1981, p. 9; see also Bazin, 1960). Barthes describes this idea in often quite literal terms by reflecting on historical photographs whose subjects have since passed away. And this is indeed implied in the *Life Is Strange* sequence described above. Although the notion of death in a photograph may also be extended to reflect broader spatial-temporal memories tied to nostalgia. While Barthes (1981) suggests that photographs evoke mourning, so too does nostalgia.[12]

In the sequence described above, an intense *punctum* response comes from Max's mourning not only of Chloe's late father, but also of the simpler pleasures of the period represented. The *punctum* in this scenario is the *time* captured in the photograph. On time, Barthes (1981) writes: "This new punctum, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* ("that-has-been"), its pure representation" (p. 96). Despite referring to much earlier historical photographs, Barthes point stands that personal *punctum* may be evoked from observing a photographic representation of lost time. Experiencing what Barths (1981) calls a "vertigo of time defeated" (p. 97), the viewer thus seeks possession of the image. This possession is precisely what Max achieves through her rewind abilities, triggered by extreme nostalgic longing.

Photography more broadly plays a significant role in *Life Is Strange*. For one, Max's scholarship to the elite Blackwell Academy is to pursue her passion for photography. She carries her camera with her at all times and players may photograph specific objects and characters throughout each episode. Jefferson's Dark Room, meanwhile, is a climactic reveal in the game. In the Dark Room, he takes photographs of dosed and kidnapped female students. Max escapes the Dark Room by using her own nearby photographs as portals to her freedom.

The theme of photography intersects with Max's nostalgia and is thereafter crucial to her coming-of-age journey. Sontag (1979) even suggests that photography may function as "a social rite," practiced as "a defence against anxiety, and a tool of

[12] See Boym (2001, pp. 54–55) who considers nostalgia in relation to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic study on mourning and melancholia.

power" against the backdrop of initiation (p. 8). According to Roberta Trites (2000), photography is employed in young adult narratives "as a metaphorical representation for achieving agency" (p. 124). Trites (2000) argues that the practice offers liminal characters the capacity to explore "the relationship between subject and object, between acting and being acted upon" (p. 123). As Max explains in her diary, "Maybe it's a way for me to be part of the world, but at a safe distance."

Max's engagement with photography lies in opposition to Jefferson's. He captures young women as objects that are bound, frightened, and drifting out of consciousness. He is fixated on girls' vulnerability. In contrast, Max's photographic objects remain subjects. She captures an image of Chloe dancing on her bed to rock music with a cigarette in hand, defiantly subverting the passive image of femininity that is crafted by Jefferson. Chloe moves her body with active freedom and fluidity as she dances in an act of self-expressive pleasure. And in the act of taking the photograph, so does Max. Crucially, Chloe asks Max to take the photo. The consensual exchange hence reflects photography's capacity to cultivate exploratory acting and subjectivity, as proposed by Trites (2000). In the foreword to *Girl on Girl: Art and Photography in the Age of the Female* Gaze, Zing Tsjeng (2017) writes,

> A woman taking a photograph of a woman isn't just performing a political act; it is also a powerful act of imagination. If each picture taken creates an image of a new reality, then this is one that suggests the exclusion of men. The photograph may allude to masculinity, but both its gaze and subject remain female. If the male gaze is thought to be toxic, the female gaze is a corrective. It is a perfect, virtuous circle, and entirely natural. (p. 7)

Tsjeng's words captivatingly summarise the transformative socio-political potential that photography can produce for adolescent girls navigating tensions of subjectivity, objectivity, and self-expression.

Meanwhile, the girl photographer is also creating artefacts to fuel her nostalgia. Material references are believed to help drive the nostalgist's imagination (Hutcheon & Valdés, 1998; Lowenthal, 2015) and what is a more appropriate medium to empower the imagination than a photograph? It is not so unexpected then, that Max's dormitory room is brimming with polaroids that collage her walls. Max's fondness for retro photography, meanwhile, points to a supplementary mode of adolescent nostalgia.

Young people embrace retro iconography in part for the way it supposes authenticity while symbolising a mythologised "halcyon days" that preceded their birth (Bartholeyns, 2014, p. 54). Retro fantasies are increasingly marketed as a lifestyle aesthetic to teens, as seen in fashion, film, the resurgence of vinyl, and in social media filters central to platforms like Instagram (Lowenthal, 2015).

If Max's analogue photography prolongs her grasp on the past, then it relatedly functions to disrupt her own forward developmental momentum, and is thus further connected to her rewind abilities. Svetlana Boym (2001) suggests that "nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress" (p. xv). Looking backwards is thereby "refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition" (Boym, 2001, p. xv). By taking a photo, the photographer preserves a passing moment, mirroring how the nostalgist "recognises the value of continuities in counterpart to what is fleeting, transitory and contingent" (Pickering & Keightley, 2006, p. 923). By maintaining a relationship with the past, the nostalgist and the photographer alike reject ideologies of perpetual hegemonic progression.

Further driving these concepts is Max's preference to self-portraiture, or taking 'selfies.' In doing so, Max immortalises her fleeting sense of self through her self-documentation. As photographer Yaeli Gabriely explains, "photographs are immortal, they are beyond time and space, and they transcend the world and the reality that created them" (as cited in Jansen, 2017, p. 91). To return to Tsjeng's (2017) words quoted above, this is also an act of asserting a female gaze, helping to dissolve the hierarchical dichotomy between subject and object, photographer and model.

Selfies have been frequently regarded as a specifically feminine practice and have hence become "a vehicle for the critique of femininity" (Davis, 2015, para. 4.). On the one hand, the practice has been criticised as an expression of adolescent narcissism entwined with attention-seeking social media "likes" (Cambre & Lavrence, 2019; Ryan, 2013). The idea that selfies enable image-autonomy has also been critically linked to postfeminist politics, which re-centre the female body as a cite of power and identity (Cambre & Lavrence, 2019; Gill, 2007). Although contrary to these viewpoints, selfies also have the capacity to challenge cultural-systemic privileges of visibility (McCarthy, 2013) while functioning as personal archives for identity expression. These range of

viewpoints confirm that selfies are indeed a contested practice, oscillating between feminist potential and anti-feminist notions of self-commodification.

Life Is Strange represents Max as participating in social media and image sharing when players are given the option to interact with her laptop and view her public profile. At the same time, however, she prefers to take her selfies with her Polaroid camera, rejecting the immateriality and reduplication afforded by digital image production. Her polaroid selfies are rather contained within her personal archive—she is reluctant to even submit them in her photography class. By withholding these images from the public, Max's self-consciousness and insecurities are made apparent, while at the same time, her private selfies are also liberated from public scrutiny.

Surveillance is a recurring theme of *Life Is Strange* that is predominately conveyed through Chloe's stepfather David. He is coded as severely paranoid, and he expresses his paranoia through non-consensual surveillance. David installs security cameras in the Price family home and inappropriately tails, surveys, and privately stores photographs and records of Blackwell students. While David's agenda to protect the students is well-intentioned, he counterintuitively breaches their privacy, trust, and sense of safety on campus. His surveillance—like Jefferson's photographs—contrast dramatically from Max's self-portraiture. Jenny Davis (2015) distinguishes between objectification and what she calls "intentionality" in her own examination of selfies. Davis (2015) argues that when surveillance is so pervasive, then "showing becomes the agentic option" (para. 10). The artefact is in effect crafted with intention, for "as long as women are objectified, turning the camera on the self is a means of intentionality" (Davis, 2015, n.p.). Despite Max's reluctance to 'show,' her production of private selfies nevertheless invokes a feminist counterpart to patriarchal watching.

This section and the previous have both overviewed how temporal interactions in *Life Is Strange* enable Max to achieve a more palpable present-day reality by maintaining a powerful relationship with the past. The game does this by tasking players with rewinding time, taking photographs, and using photographs as portals to the past. These ludic qualities function as manifestations for Max's nostalgia. Max's rewind abilities and photographic practices facilitate her sense of agency, subjectivity, and self-expression. The manipulation of temporal reality moreover defies neoliberal pressures toward linear progress, while Max's self-portraiture offers a resistant

counterpoint to the patriarchal surveillance inhabiting her reality. In a setting that presents feminine adolescence as particularly troubling, Max expresses nostalgia for her more contented childhood; a sentiment that I argue is reflected upon and brought to her present through *Life Is Strange*'s gameplay mechanics. Through these mechanics, untimely resistance is placed into the player's control. The distribution of agency between the player and the character in Girlhood Games like *Life Is Strange* allows girl players to then actively experiment with the game's subversions.

Conclusion

Life Is Strange is a Girlhood Game that presents a heroines' resilience against unrelenting patriarchal obstacles. The final episode's conclusion, however, would appear to undermine this framing as it ultimately punishes Max for intervening with time. It does this by configuring her power against the safety of Arcadia Bay in the form of an impending tornado. The tornado comes into existence because of Max's continual interference with Chloe's demise since that early bathroom shooting sequence. Witnessing the storm from the safety of a lookout point, Max laments, "This is my storm. I caused this… I caused all of this. I changed fate and destiny so much that… I actually did alter the course of everything. And all I created was just death and destruction!" The final choice presented to players is whether to sacrifice Chloe by going back in time and not preventing the bathroom shooting and thus sparing Arcadia Bay from the tornado; or to sacrifice Arcadia Bay, keeping Chloe alive but allowing the tornado to reach the town's population. To be sure, the consequences associated with her powers are foreshadowed in each episode by unexplainable environmental anomalies (snow on a warm autumn day, an unforeseen eclipse, a double moon, and beached whales). This conclusion displaces her supernatural powers back into a harsh reality that is incompatible with powerful and non-conforming young women.

Much has been said already on this controversial ending in both academic and popular discourses. Mahli-Ann Rakkomkaew Butt and Daniel Dunne (2019) argue that *Life Is Strange* expresses a common narrative convention in which rebel girls, like Chloe, are antithetical to patriarchal society and must therefore be sacrificed to restore the status-quo. Holger Pötzsch and Agata Waszkiewicz (2019) likewise consider how both endings are equally tragic, as they negate Max and Chloe's agency established in

the previous episodes. They argue that the choice itself is "unforgiving" (Pötzsch & Waszkiewicz, 2019, para. 36). Criticisms also take the characters' sexualities into consideration, noting that the game's conclusion subscribes to the harmful "bury your gays" trope, where LGBTQ+ characters face tragedy, like Max, or are fated to die, like Chloe (Alexandra, 2018; Chan; 2017; Pötzsch & Waszkiewicz, 2019).

These perspectives are each compelling and persuasive and it is not my intention to undermine their important criticisms. This chapter rather hopes to add to this pool of thought by instead looking towards the subversive potential of the game's resistant body. Regardless of its conclusion, the player's journey with the characters throughout the five episodes nonetheless remains cognizant. By the time they reach the game's conclusion, players have already spent hours roleplaying a narrative about rebellion and justice from the perspective of a resilient teen girl. The ending may still be read as an indictment of power structures, but that also addresses their resistance to being overthrown.

Fan rejections of the ending attest to its limitations in undoing the game's subversive body. Prominent videogame media outlets, *PC Gamer* and *Kotaku*, both released articles condemning the ending: "Why a Bad Ending Doesn't have to Ruin a Great Game" (Macgregor, 2015) and "Life Is Strange's Ending is a Hot Mess" (Hernandez, 2015). While condemning the conclusion, both articles stress the significance of the themes explored within the game's body. The *Kotaku* article sums this up nicely when its author Patricia Hernandez states: "A game is more than an ending" (2015, para. 14).

Butt and Dunne (2019) discuss another form of player critique within the online hashtag "#bae>bay" (where "bae" refers to Chloe and "bay" to Arcadia Bay). The hashtag was a defiant response to the implication that sacrificing Chloe is the canonical ending as its ensuing cut scene is more nuanced and her death is stressed to be fated. The hashtag represents support for the presumed non-canonical ending. Butt and Dunne (2019) write:

> These players flipped writers' intentions in terms of existential pondering—these players were able to seize the opportunity given in the penultimate choice, rather than following what was presumed as the right choice and claim what was meant as an alternate ending as their own through online

> discussions—thus performing the very autonomy in which *Life Is Strange* was attempting to question. (p. 436)

The feminist resistance embedded throughout each episode seems to have therefore led players to reject its disempowering ending. These instances of critique and defiance demonstrate the capacity of the game's body to inspire resistance. To repeat Max's own statement: "Who ever said we only have a single fate?"

Throughout this chapter I have argued that *Life Is Strange* presents a critique on neoliberal politics and a performance of girlhood that resists patriarchal obstacles. When Max returns to her childhood hometown, she faces a troubling reality filled with bullying, surveillance, and gendered violence. I regard Max's homecoming disappointments to be predominately gendered by drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's (1949/1972) positioning of adolescent girlhood as a period of disorientation and a disheartening confrontation of girls' secondary status. Due to these conditions, Max's longing for her childhood represents a specific form of nostalgia that may be related to girlhood—a form that appears to have been left behind in discourses on nostalgia.

Life Is Strange ludically projects Max's nostalgia through its play mechanics. The ability to rewind time or use photographs as portals to past realities facilitates Max's longing for the past. The game's temporal manipulations demonstrate how the past may be harnessed to rewrite a discontented present. Max meanwhile pursues photography to convert fleeting moments into enduring material artefacts. Photography furthermore enables teen girls to experiment with concepts of subjectivity and self-expression. In this way, Max's photography contests patriarchal surveillance and the male gaze as dramatised through the characters David and Jefferson.

Players of *Life Is Strange* roleplay a resilient and anarchic performance of girlhood that defies oppressive societal structures. Over the course of the five episodes, Max and Chloe use Max's temporal abilities to achieve justice for Rachel and to reclaim agency over their lives. Despite its tragic finale, it is difficult to walk away from the game and conceptualise Max and Chloe as destined victims, when the overall experience is, at its core, about girls rewriting their destinies.

Life Is Strange stands as a tool to deepen our understandings of girlhood. As a videogame, it communicates meaning through its play mechanics, situating players as active resistors to its many patriarchal obstacles. *Life Is Strange* hence demonstrates

another instance of how Girlhood Games have the potential to function as transformative spaces for girl players.

4. Transgression in Horror Spaces:

From Hunted to Hunter in *The Last of Us* Series

So the little girl took an automatic out of her basket and shot the wolf dead.
Moral: It is not so easy to fool little girls nowadays as it used to be.
—James Thurber, 'The Girl and the Wolf' (1939)

Transformative Horror Games

As the previous chapters have so far explored, Girlhood Games can be read as spaces for rebellion and resistance. I move on now to their potential for transgression. While certainly related, transgression is distinct from rebelling against the status-quo. Transgression, in this context, is rather about "violating" the status-quo and the subversive and forbidden pleasure one experiences when doing so (Mortensen & Jørgensen, 2020, p. 2; see also Pötzsch, 2018). I am therefore shifting my attention from heroic representations of girlhood to anti-heroic roleplaying.

Horror games are a useful site for locating transgression, as the horror genre has always been interested in boundary-crossing, excess, and the confrontation of disturbing and intense emotions. In this sense, the emotionally challenging scenarios presented in horror games offer a safe space for both engaging with pain and traumatic fiction, while also experimenting with the pleasures of transgressive play. I take Naughty Dog's post-apocalyptic, horror action adventure series, *The Last of Us* (2013–2020) as my case study for unpacking these elements. The popular game's hypervisible heroine, Ellie, comes of age amidst extreme and visceral violence and hatred, which is crucially both enacted upon and perpetrated by her.

Raised in a post-apocalyptic world makes not for an easy adolescence. In *The Last of Us* series—which includes *The Last of Us* (2013), its downloadable content (DLC) *The Last of Us: Left Behind* (2014), and *The Last of Us Part II* (2020)—Ellie transforms from a smart-mouthed and curious fourteen-year-old to a hardened and

animalistic avenger by the age of nineteen. In the series, survivors live roughly among the ruins of an American landscape succumbed to the "cordyceps" virus; a fungal infection that transforms humans into flesh-eating monstrosities known as "the infected." Born into the world after its collapse, Ellie's youth is hence marked by violence, trauma, and a necessity to grow up fast.

This chapter traces Ellie's trajectory from hunted to hunter across the two main instalments of the series, and in turn identifies a number of feminist functions of horror that surface through the game medium.[1] I position my discussion of horror among broader folklore and fairy tale traditions, whose darker themes re-emerge in contemporary horror. I hence continue my theorisation of Girlhood Games through the lens of storytelling traditions, as discussed through the *Bildungsroman* in chapter two, and the monomyth, briefly, in chapter three. For this chapter, I consider Ellie's transformation from hunted to hunter within the context of the tale Red Riding Hood, likening her transformation to the tale's own defiant heroine and then into becoming its predatory wolf.

My focus therefore lies on Ellie's emergent transgressive rage, which is present in *The Last of Us* (hereafter *Part I*) and drives the progress of *The Last of Us Part II* (hereafter *Part II*). I liken this rage to an extreme revival of the young heroines of early fairy tales, who, like the slasher's Final Girl, are defiant survivors in especially dark settings. When Ellie violently triumphs over a paedophile and cannibal named David in *Part I*, one may recall Red Riding Hood's own triumph over the wolf, who likewise held a sinister appetite for the flesh of young girls. I argue here, however, that *Part II* shifts from heroic resistance to transgression when Ellie is repositioned into the ravenous wolf herself when embarking on the revenge quest that lies at the heart of the narrative. Her markers of Otherness—Ellie is queer, and an 'unfeminine' tomboy—opens up interpretations for her violence and rage to be situated among broader political imaginings. I consider Ellie's primal hunt to be a forbidden pleasure, where the Othered subject violently refuses containment.

I've chosen to focus on *The Last of Us* series firstly because it represents an endurance of fairy tale themes without being an overt adaptation. The series has thus flown under the radar from discussions of fairy tales in videogames that tend to focus

[1] While the DLC's queer romance and mall date setting would appear highly pertinent for my study on girlhood representations, I rather limit my attention to the two main games both for brevity.

on direct revisions (see Keebaugh, 2013; Whatman, 2017; Whatman & Tadeschi, 2018). Locating fairy tale themes in *The Last of Us* rather draws attention to their deep-rooted presence in the Western cultural psyche. I have also selected the series for analysis because it belongs within the triple-A sector of gaming and the traditional and hegemonic action adventure game style. It therefore represents a mainstream, or 'blockbuster' case study for this thesis and hence an example of Girlhood Games' normativity. *Part II*, for instance, sold more than four million copies within its first three days, breaking the record for Sony's fastest selling first-party game—previously held by *Marvel's Spiderman*, released by Insomniac Games in 2018 (Amore, 2020).[2] The significant reception of the series in the triple-A gaming community makes Ellie one of the most—if not *the* most—high-profile, visible girlhood figures in Western gaming at the time of writing.[3] This chapter shows how transgressive readings can be drawn from even the most seemingly normative of videogames like *The Last of Us* series.

Series Summary: Reapproaching *The Last of Us*

As a narrative rich series, a preliminary summary of its events helps clarify the ensuing analysis. In the series' first instalment, players assume the role of a smuggler named Joel. Joel's task is to escort Ellie to a government-resistance group called the Fireflies. She is introduced as a feisty young girl and is revealed to be uniquely immune to the virus. The Fireflies hence intend to harness Ellie's immunity to develop a vaccine. The game transpires across Joel and Ellie's journey from Boston to Salt Lake City. It centres on the development of Joel's paternal attachment to Ellie, rebuilding his disavowed paternal identity after the death of his biological daughter. Ellie's own identity journey is also a focus of the game, as she steps out of Boston's militarised quarantine zone for the first time to experience the curiosities and cruelties of the outside world.

[2] First-party refers to games published by the platform holder and developed by an internal studio.

[3] Her mainstream recognition will indeed be further bolstered through HBO's television adaptation, projected to air in 2022. Naughty Dog, like HBO, distinguishes its brand through its high-quality, serious, and cinematic projects.

While the majority of the game is played through the perspective of Joel, the game does not solely focus on his story. A portion of *Part I* that I refer to as "the winter chapter"—because the game is separated by seasonal title cards—shifts the player's perspective to Ellie's. Joel is injured in the previous chapter and must rely on Ellie to keep him safe and to procure medical supplies. I discuss this portion of the game through the lens of horror and the Red Riding Hood fairy tale, as Ellie experiences perhaps her most significant formative moment when she learns that a seemingly trustworthy man, David, is both a cannibal and a paedophile.

Part I concludes with the player again taking on Joel's perspective. Joel and Ellie arrive to meet the Fireflies at the Salt Lake City hospital where Joel is told that the removal of the virus, which mutates within the brain, means that Ellie will not survive the surgery. Players must then fight their way through the hospital to rescue Ellie, prioritising her life over the vaccine's development. The game here disillusions the player's traditional assumption that they are inserting themselves into a heroic character. In this instance, players are rather interacting with Joel's anti-heroic story than partaking in their own. They have no option but to murder the unarmed surgeon if they wish to continue the game, a morally corrupt action that unsettles the assumed heroic narrative. Aside from crucially denying the human race a vaccine, Joel also denies Ellie the agency to make her own weighted decision concerning her future and her role in the future of society. When she wakes in his car, he lies to her about her importance, falsely claiming there are dozens that are also immune and that the Fireflies had given up on producing a vaccine. The ramifications of his choice and his lie play a central role in *Part II*.

In the 2020 sequel, players take on the perspectives of Ellie and a new character named Abby. For the purpose of this chapter, which discusses the series as a whole, I focus only on Ellie as her development is more centrally charted. In *Part II,* Ellie is nineteen years old, yet flashbacks offer glimpses of her fractured relationship with Joel throughout the years in between, including her discovery of his lie. The sequel is significantly darker in tone. It follows Ellie's extreme violent retribution after she witnesses Joel's brutal murder by a group of former Fireflies. The group is driven by its own retribution after his actions in the first game upturned their lives. Abby, the daughter of the murdered surgeon, leads the pursuit, torturing Joel and delivering the final fatal blow.

Part II hones in on the idea that players are involved in an anti-heroic story. Ellie's self-destructive revenge is placed in the players' hands, producing reports of varying degrees of discomfort. Reviewers described the game as "emotional whiplash" (Myers, 2020, para. 25) or a "misery simulator," (MacLeod, 2020, n.p.). As one reviewer succinctly summarises, "It's a hard game to stomach, in part because so much of who Ellie is and what she does is beyond your control" (Plagge, 2020, para. 16). Perhaps the game's grim and gory violence is precisely what allows it to be about a teen girl character as its status as a triple-A game is more difficult to question. I complicate this point, however, in the thesis' concluding chapter.

As a widely played and critically well-received game, *Part I* garnered a notable degree of academic attention. As *Part II* is still a recent release at the time of writing, scholarly literature up to now mostly only addresses *Part I* and its DLC *Left Behind*. Discussions have examined the series' representations of same-sex relationships (Sipocz, 2018), and its explorations of humanity and morality in its post-civilisation setting (Green, 2016; Joyce, 2018). A number of perspectives circulate around the character Joel. Soraya Murray (2018) situates him as a figure of whiteness in crisis, while many others unpack his paternal figuration, locating the game within a trend of triple-A "dad games" released around the same time (Cruea, 2018; Hill, 2016; Lucat, 2017; Stang, 2017; Voorhees, 2016).[4] This chapter builds upon these works by focussing on Ellie's coming-of-age throughout the series. I primarily examine the culmination of her rage, exploring her status from hunted survivor, to anti-heroic avenger. Few works have solely focussed on Ellie as a heroine because of her subsidiary role in the first game. But in light of *Part II,* and also the DLC *Left Behind* in which she also leads, the first game necessitates revisiting in order to holistically make sense of this character's coming-of-age trajectory throughout the series. With the release of *Part II*, the series can hence be re-read as Ellie's story rather than Joel's.

This chapter first establishes the feminist affordances derived from the horror genre's application to games and how the player's participation in videogame horror invokes a strong sense of self-awareness and critical reflection. I then elaborate on the connections shared between fairy tales and horror, namely the slasher and rape

[4] In reference to a trend of games where players take on an adult male in charge of protecting a daughter or surrogate daughter character. Other examples include *The Walking Dead* (Telltale, 2012), *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013), *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios, 2012) and *Dishonored 2* (Arkane Studios, 2016), and to a lesser extent, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015).

revenge subgenres and their shared themes with Red Riding Hood. *The Last of Us* series updates the tale in that it champions the heroine's self-defence through gruesome spectacle before transforming her into the animalistic wolf itself. This transformation shifts the tale from a contemporary revision to a postmodern adaptation as it moves from productive instruction (an original purpose of fairy tales) to transgressive pleasure.

The intention of exploring Ellie's coming-of-age through the lens of horror, fairy tales, and transgression is to present another theoretical toolkit to comprehend Girlhood Games and their transformative potential. Approaching the series through these lenses furthers our understanding of Girlhood Games and their affordances, while the endurance and reworking of folkloric tradition deepens our knowledge of how girlhood itself continues to be understood and represented in culture

Horror Games and Feminist Practice

In comparison to the games previously explored throughout this thesis, the transformative potential of horror games comes with a greater degree of intensity. The horror genre explores transgression, taboos, and discomfort. Horror Girlhood Games are therefore a promising site for boundary-pushing performances. Each of the texts discussed so far indeed work to undermine the status-quo, though turning now to horror, I interpret how the genre distinctly presents extreme scenarios of pain, trauma, and violence, as well as transgressive desire.

To unpack these elements, I draw on Rikke Schubart's *Mastering Fear: Women, Emotions, and Contemporary Horror* (2018) and Torill Elvira Mortensen and Kristine Jørgensen's *The Paradox of Transgression in Games* (2020). Schubart views horror cinema as a playground, where the experience of watching a horror film provides an opportunity to safely engage with and master challenging and painful emotions. Relating the genre to animal play fighting, Schubart (2018) argues that horror cinema "is a safe place to learn things like survival skills, social rules, and creativity" and is equally adaptive for both men and women (p. 3). She focusses though on texts with resistant female protagonists and suggests that female spectators may in turn imagine "new and positive scripts for women" (Schubart, 2018, p. 13). Explaining the workings of the genre, Schubart (2018) writes, "We observe characters wander into

bad places, torture cellars, and deep woods, we share their emotions, and when they die, we remember their actions and we expand our skills and choices for the future" (pp. 17–18). The likeness to videogame play is at once strikingly apparent when considering the medium's conventional trial-and-error systems and even the shared language of "mastering" an obstacle. Schubart even cites early game theory to establish her framing. But these ideas are also aligned with my application of liminal theory to Girlhood Games. Like Schubart's playground, I have argued throughout this thesis that Girlhood Games are threshold spaces; separate from the regulated and structured real world, and so safe to rehearse and experiment with identity—and to act against hegemonic normalcy. Schubart's understanding of horror is therefore highly applicable in comprehending how horror games contribute to the transformative potential of Girlhood Games.

To account for the intricacies of the game medium, I situate Schubart's (2018) work in conversation with Mortensen and Jørgensen's (2020) research on videogame transgressions. Unlike Schubart, Mortensen and Jørgensen do not discuss subversive practices through the exclusive lens of feminism or horror, yet their work offers a useful means of understanding the specificities of the game medium as a relatively safe space for transgressive performance. I write "relatively" because Mortensen and Jørgensen are careful to note that videogames are not exempt from real-world emotional consequences, despite their fictional grounds; a viewpoint shared with Schubart. They do argue, however, that because of games' temporarily traversed and rule-based fictional spaces, those emotions may be managed through interactive "effort and strategy" (Mortensen & Jørgensen, 2020, p. 4). By "transgression," Mortensen and Jørgensen refer to the violation of the status-quo; from breaching social norms in narrative content and character representations, to breaking the conventional rules of a given genre or game style (2020, p. 2).

Where Schubart (2018) reads horror cinema as a safe space to "master" painful emotions, Mortensen and Jørgensen (2020) similarly view games as a space to manage or mitigate "uncomfortable topics" that in effect have the potential of "challenging our ideology or conviction" (p. 195). They argue that the game player's participation strengthens the degree of emotional involvement because their in-game actions are an active translation of those emotions (Mortensen & Jørgensen, 2020; see also Ndalianis, 2012). Considering these ideas through a feminist perspective then, I

situate *The Last of Us* series as having the potential to cultivate girl players' own transgressive reflections. This is because the series positions its players to embody and enact the extreme transgressive actions of its anti-heroine Ellie.

The horror genre, however, has long offered captivating representations of female violence. It has also long been recognised as a genre that caters to women's interests (Cherry 1999/2002; Nowell, 2011; Younger, 2017), with Carol J. Clover's famous *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (1992) being a key work in this area. Feminist narratives and women's perspectives have become more visible in mainstream horror cinema and television—both on screen and behind the scenes—since the latter half of the twentieth century (Younger, 2017) as seen in films like *Jennifer's Body* (Kusama, 2009), *The Babadook* (Kent, 2014), *The Witch* (Eggers, 2015), *Bird Box* (Bier, 2018), *Black Christmas* (Takal, 2019), *Midsommar* (Aster, 2019), and the *Fear Street* trilogy (Janiak, 2021), though women have been involved in the marginal spaces of underground and cult horror for decades.

Triple-A videogaming's pervasive associations with boys' culture, however, has limited the opportunity for feminist engagement within its own horror renditions. That is not to say that horror games have sidelined the genre's convention of female leads. On the contrary, *Resident Evil 3: Nemesis* (Capcom, 1999), *Silent Hill 3* (Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo, 2003), and *Alien: Isolation* (Creative Assembly, 2014) are among some of the many well-known games that feature female protagonists within classic horror settings. Interestingly, *The Last of Us* series is seldom categorised as a horror game with the same assurance as the games listed above. The series is nonetheless packed with horror references and conventions, from the infected monsters, cannibalism, visceral violence, haunting abandoned settings, and fierce female survivors (see Stuart, 2020), while borrowing themes from slasher and rape revenge subgenres. Analysing what these traditions can do in Girlhood Games like the *The Last of Us* series, deepens our understanding of their transformative possibilities. I therefore locate value in the intensity of playing horror games about girlhood.

Retelling Fairy Tales through Horror

As stated earlier, this chapter examines Ellie's coming-of-age through the games' slasher and rape revenge horror conventions while linking their thematic elements to

Western fairy tale and folk storytelling traditions. The enduring presence of those themes recalls what L. A. Alexander (2013) refers to as a society's "recognisable formulas" (n.p.) embedded in storytelling and popular culture to communicate social ideals—a concept discussed in chapter two. In this instance, tracing how fairy tale themes have evolved within contemporary horror allows texts like horror videogames to be read as markers of transitioning social values, namely how figurations of femininity have been, and continue to be, imagined. Locating shifting values by engaging with literary traditions has been a constant approach throughout this thesis. Folklore and fairy tales, however, were not always bound by literary formulas. As Maria Tatar (2021, p. 30) points out, bards and oral storytellers rather embraced narrative fluidity, encouraging their listeners to participate, challenge, weigh-in, and ultimately help shape the tale. The collaborative nature of videogames might even be beginning to recapture what Tatar (2021) calls the "improvisational energy" (p. 30) of oral tales.

The fairy tale traditions I refer to are pre-patriarchal oral variations. By "pre-patriarchal" I mean early versions of fairy tales prior to their print production, which, in Western Europe, was notably led by figures like Charles Perrault (1697/2009) and the Brothers Grimm (1812/2014), who published several tales into popular collections. Before this, fairy tales were often shared within domestic settings and were orally shared by matriarchal storytellers—or "gossips, grannies, nannies, and female domestic servants" (Tatar, 2021, p. 112). The stories offered imaginative possibilities for women and the lower classes while also serving as cautionary tales (Warner, 1995). They warned of the dangers posed by sinister strangers and wicked husbands, while encouraging girls to be inquisitive and resourceful as a means of survival.

Their darker subject matter therefore transpires well into horror narratives today. As Tatar (2021) writes, "Folktales enable us to process feelings, giving a name to our fears and challenges" (p. 123). Tatar's words echo what Schubart (2018) presents as the process of "mastering fear" through fictional horror. Although Perrault's and the Grimms's tales may be considered dark by today's standards—especially relative to their even further sanitised "Disneyfication"—their print production nonetheless intended to relocate the tales to childrens' nurseries, and in doing so, "they lost much of their subversive energy" (Tatar, 2021, pp. 116–117). The romanticised notions of love, marriage, and benevolent male rescuers that we are

familiar with today, were rather introduced within the printed versions of these tales. Their upper-class, male authors often modified the tales' educational values to instead instruct on socially approved feminine behaviour (see Short, 2007; Tatar, 2021; Warner, 1995; Zipes, 1994). Dubbing the oral variations "pre-patriarchal" is not to assume they were exempt from patriarchal influence, but rather to differentiate them from their later, and more decisively regulatory revisions.

These revisions depoliticised the tales' original resistant spirit, condemning the heroine's curiosity and exploration, while often removing her capacity for self-defence. In the example of Red Riding Hood, Perrault closes his version, titled *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge* (1697/2009), with Red's demise inside the belly of the wolf. The later Grimms' version, *Little Red Riding Hood* (1812/2014), likewise concludes with Red's devourment, although the Woodsman is introduced to rescue her, slaying the wolf and cutting him open to free her. Oral variations of the tale, however, more frequently incorporated triumphant endings without the presence of a male saviour. In these versions, Red independently—or sometimes with help from grandma— outsmarts and either escapes or defeats the wolf herself (see Bacchilega 1997). Cristina Bacchilega (1997) presents a concise contrast between the different versions, writing that the oral variations rather celebrated ingenuity against danger and "demonstrated the importance of women's knowledge to survival" (p. 56). In contrast, the two literary adaptations discussed both present Red as a victim, while admonishing her for disobeying her mother's directive to remain on the path.

Fairy tale revisions have increasingly emerged and become popularised in the last decade within film and television, from *Red Riding Hood* (Hardwicke, 2011), *Into the Woods* (Marshall, 2014), and *Beauty and the Beast* (Cooper-Landsman & Levin, 2012–2016). The merging of fairy tales to horror texts has also taken place since the latter half of the twentieth century in films like *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976), *Ginger Snaps* (Fawcett, 2000), and *Hard Candy* (Slade, 2005) (see Greenhill & Kohm, 2010; Hayton, 2011; Short, 2007). In these horror texts, female protagonists resourcefully survive against patriarchal threats or reap their own horrific revenge without the aid of a male companion. Fairy tales also emerge through videogames through deliberate adaptations that explore the "darker undercurrents" of fairy tales, as seen in other horror Girlhood Games like *The Path*, a chilling adaptation of Red Riding Hood mentioned in chapter two (Whatman & Tedeschi, 2018, p. 882).

Early fairy tales and horror are indeed seen to go hand in hand, sharing dark and violent themes as well as imperilled heroines. Marina Warner (1995) points out that fairy tales sought to both frighten and entertain their young listeners (p. 243). For Sue Short (2007), the fairy tale heroine stands as an early articulation of the Final Girl—archetypal to horror's slasher genre—who holds her own against the monster. The Final Girl is a character trope famously identified by Carol J. Clover (1992), who defines this figure as the watchful, intelligent, and resourceful survivor of slasher films: "The one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends [...] who is chased, cornered, wounded" (p. 35). The Final Girl is androgynous, or "boyish" (Clover, 1992, p. 40), and not sexually active. For this reason, Clover proposes that she functions as a stand-in for taboo male desire; for male audience members to identify with the pleasures of terror through the more palatable guise of the female heroine. This theorisation, however, fails to acknowledge the genre's ample female audience, drawn to horror through their identification with its courageous female resisters (Cherry, 1999/2002; Nowell, 2011).

The Final Girl is an applicable figure to the storytelling traditions of self-saving fairy tale heroines. The structure of the slasher then, resembles the themes of a tale like Red Riding Hood as both are concerned with young women in transition who unveil and triumph over the disturbing appetites of male-coded monsters. Self-saving and agentic fairy tale heroines hence re-emerge through horror, experiencing—and perpetrating—confrontational pain and intensified violence in these contemporary and visceral retellings. Ellie, a queer and virginal girl with tomboy clothes, 'boyish' interests like comic books and science fiction, and a fighting spirit, exemplifies the Final Girl archetype—although, significantly, by *Part II* she is no longer a virgin as implied through her relations with Dina. The textual analysis section of this chapter hence interprets the winter chapter of *Part I* as an interactive slasher, framing Ellie as the slasher's Final Girl and in turn a reconfiguration of the hunted Red Riding Hood.

Red Riding Hood functions well as a reference point to distinguish Ellie's role across the two games, for in *Part II,* her revenge involves an animalistic hunt that is analogous to the tale's predatory wolf. Crucially, the horror genre provides a platform for female and Other figures to breach social boundaries, offering a myriad of anarchical monstrosities for non-white, queer, and female audiences to subversively identify with (Cherry, 1999/2002; Williams, 1984). In becoming the wolf, *Part II* shifts

from the slasher and instead evokes rape revenge. Clover (1992) has also observed a link between the tale and rape revenge:

> Consider Little Red Riding Hood, who strikes off into the wilderness only to be captured and eaten by a wolf (whom she foolishly trusts), though she is finally saved by a passing woodsman. Multiply and humanize the wolf, read "rape" for "eat," skip the woodsman (let Red save herself), and you have *I Spit on Your Grave*. (p. 124)

I rather interpret Ellie's animalistic vengeance to resemble the wolf itself though. As outlined by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas (2011), the rape revenge structure follows a woman's (or a male agent's) retributive action following a rape. It shares thematic cues with vigilante films, particularly through its protagonist's transition from "victim to avenger" (Schubart, 2007, p. 84). Rape revenge stories are not locked to horror, but as Heller-Nicholas (2011) contends, horror is an effective site for their depiction because of its exploration of bodies and the primal subconscious.

The rape revenge heroine operates outside of systemic justice and hence contests civilisation. Her response to a monstrous violation is driven by a primal desire for justice that necessarily embraces her own capacity for monstrousness. Ellie in *Part II* comes to resemble this monstrous figure, hence my repositioning of her role to the wolf. Ellie's vengeance, however, is not in response to a sexual violation of her body, but rather to the brutal torture and murder of her father-figure Joel. Yet her rage is nevertheless driven by accumulative personal trauma, and the threat of David's rape in *Part I* would have certainly left a profound impression.

Contemporary versions of fairy tales have produced fascinating interpretations of the heroine's animalistic qualities. Angela Carter's (1979/2016) short stories in particular offer adult and erotic postmodern revisions of well-established fairy tales including Red Riding Hood. Her stories "The Company of Wolves" and "Wolf-Alice" both experiment with Red's animalistic desire and her merging with the wolf. As Tatar (2021) describes, "Carter aimed to point the way to accepting our animal nature [...] and the beastliness in us" (p. 141). Carter's "The Company of Wolves" presents a sexually agentic Red burning the wolf's human clothing before seducing him. Red's primal, animalistic drives are drawn forth as she subsequently picks out and eats the lice from his pelt (see Lau, 2014). "Wolf-Alice" meanwhile, experiments further with a

young girls' animalism, as the story features a feral heroine raised by wolves. Meanwhile, "The Tiger's Bride," a story influenced by *Beauty and the Beast*, has the bestial master lick off the young heroine's layer of skin to expose her fur beneath.

Part II of *The Last of Us* may be read as producing its own postmodern interpretation of Red Riding Hood's animalistic drives. *Part II* follows Carter's (1979/2016) merging of the girl and the wolf through Ellie's animalistic pursuit. Its interactive format, though, enables players to slip into the wolf's pelt themselves. The series also follows Carter's mature retelling by evoking the disturbing violence of horror's rape revenge stories. The game departs from Carter's erotic centrality, however, in that Ellie's primal desire towards animalism is rather driven by the horror genre's powerful emotions of rage and pain.

The final reasoning for integrating fairy tales into this discussion is due to their primarily instructive function. When collaborating with the participatory videogame medium, the instructive potential of both may be amplified (see Whatman 2017). This is because the player's actions are directly implicated in crafting the tale's overarching message. In this instance, the game offers a space for subversive feminine behaviour, from violent self-defence to transgressive animalism, and so recalls matriarchal advice upon young women's survival. These player performances are necessary for consuming the videogame text. Because the transformative potential, however, is informed by transgression rather than regulation, it is perhaps more appropriate to depart from the language of "instruction" that is applied to fairy tales. Tatar (2021), for instance, describes traditional children's literature as a tool for "taming" their "unruly instincts" while authors who rejected those traditions were producing resources "*for* children rather than for their own good" (p. 168). Girlhood Games that offer transgressive roleplaying would likewise be better conceived of as in service of players' forbidden desires than as instructive guides.

By identifying subversion within fairy tale game revisions, I am building on my linkage of game spaces with identity rehearsal as put forth throughout this thesis. In the context of horror and fairy tales, I take on Schubart (2018) and Mortensen and Jørgensen's (2020) similar framing of transformative fiction as safe grounds for rehearsal and management. The following textual analysis highlights how transgressive performances are embedded throughout *The Last of Us* series.

The Heroine Hunted: Slaying the Wolf

The winter chapter of *Part I* draws on slasher traditions to present a fascinating update of the fairy tale Red Riding Hood. The presence of these traditions in a playable medium strengthens their transformative implications, because girl players are acting out the means of survival themselves.

As stated earlier, *Part I* is not as clear-marked a horror game as others, like the post-apocalyptic *Resident Evil* series (Capcom et al., 1996–2021). In the winter chapter, however, the tension is duly heightened. Ellie is not armed and equipped with Joel's numerous weapons and upgrades, nor does she have the physical strength to withstand extensive melee or hand-to-hand combat. It therefore more closely resembles the disempowerment of typical survivor horror games (see Krzywinska, 2015a). Furthermore, Ellie's ordeal with David is far more personal, unsettling, and confronting than the anonymous enemies that players had so far encountered as the game's primary protagonist Joel.

This sequence is also significant because it expands Ellie's role in the game. Up to this point, she functions as a vehicle for Joel's character trajectory by reacquainting him with his renounced paternal identity. Ellie's design is likewise driven to assist and support players, requiring their protection without being a burden (see Dyckhoff, 2015). Ellie's supplementary status is not fully inverted until the winter chapter. Although, as the game's AI engineer Max Dyckhoff (2015) notes, Ellie's perspective is always somewhat present, as the player shares Ellie's fresh observation of the game's world "instead of through the world weary eyes of Joel" (p. 431). The winter chapter, however, switches the perspective entirely, as the player's actions are now fully enmeshed on screen with Ellie's.

The winter chapter opens with Ellie hunting a deer in the woods. Each shot with her bow and arrow provokes the deer to retreat further into the woods, prompting Ellie to stray further from familiar territory. She follows the deer to the ruins of a cabin resort and comments knowingly on this familiar horror trope: "This place is not creepy at all." The deer's body is eventually found as she emerges from one of the cabins, prompting a cut scene that introduces David. In this cut scene, Ellie draws her bow and arrow after hearing the sounds of another's presence. David appears, and players see a man who shares Joel's age and rugged appearance. He has a strikingly soft-spoken and mild temperament. David politely pleads to Ellie that he and his

companion "only want to talk." Ellie's response demonstrates that her youth and innocence does not equate to naiveté, as she maintains her drawn bow and threatens to put an arrow "right between [his] eyes" if he were to make a sudden movement. David explains that he belongs to a community with women and children, but then foreshadows his later endeavour to devour Ellie when he implores, "We're all very, very hungry." Ellie agrees to trade her deer for medicine and is left alone with David as his companion retrieves the penicillin she bargained for. David suggests that they travel back to his people together, but Ellie remains resolutely attentive; "I'm not following you anywhere."

She resembles here the heroine of James Thurber's modern retelling, *The Girl and the Wolf* (1939)—referenced in this chapter's epigraph—where the girl immediately sees through the wolf's disguise. Thurber's closing moral reads, "It is not so easy to fool little girls nowadays as it used to be" (1939, para. 3). David tries earnestly—but in vain—to soften Ellie's suspicions of him, expressing concern that she is out on her own, asking for her name, and assuring when she refuses that he understands the difficulty of trusting strangers. David's soft mannerisms recall Perrault's concluding moral in his version of Red Riding Hood:

> Now there are real wolves, with hairy pelts and enormous teeth; but also wolves who seem perfectly charming, sweet-natured and obliging, who pursue young girls in the street and pay them the most flattering attentions. Unfortunately, these smooth-tongued, smooth-pelted wolves are the most dangerous beasts of all. (as cited in Warner, 1995, pp. 182–183)

While this isn't a typical slasher with a series of teen deaths that precede a final confrontation, Ellie's adamant paranoia is a trait that she shares with the slasher's Final Girl and that ultimately ensures her survival. One of David's men, though, later describes her as David's "newest pet," implying that there has been a line of victims before her. This wolf, however, resists harming Ellie until he can first win her trust. Her distrust is heightened, however, when they are attacked by infected and David reveals his hidden weapon in a moment of self-defence. The overwhelming attack and Ellie's limited supply of ammo, however, positions players to concede to his necessary assistance. Any inclination towards accepting David after this sequence, however, is undermined when he reveals that it was his men that Ellie and Joel fought against in

the previous chapter that left Joel seriously injured. David insists that he does not blame Ellie for the deaths of his group, for she is "just a kid." He instead invites her to his community and offers to protect her, which she resolutely declines before returning to Joel with the medicine.

David and his men later track and attack Ellie, and players must then direct them away from Joel who is still unconscious. Players are tasked to stealthily evade or take out the men who are hunting her. Regardless of the players' approach, however, David inevitably captures Ellie. In another cut scene, she awakens from the inside of a cage from where she watches David's companion unceremoniously hack limbs from a torso on a steel bench. This is the first explicit indication of the group's cannibalism. When David enters, Ellie defiantly calls him "a fucking animal." She asks, "So now what? You gonna chop me up into tiny pieces?" He again insists that he wishes to protect her. He attempts to persuade her again to join his group, while once more entreating her to reveal her name. His paedophilia is also then made apparent when he insists that Ellie is "special" and proceeds to tenderly stroke her hand. Ellie's disheartening response—"Oh"—reflects her processing of this confronting knowledge.

As Marina Warner (1995, p. 259) has noted, the act of devouring in fairy tale narratives was often an allegory for sex. On folklore symbolism, Tatar (2021) points out that "[d]isturbing metaphors are always easier to process than disturbing realities" (p. 272). Red Riding Hood in particular is considered a cautionary tale for rape, as in several versions Red is frequently deceived into sharing a bed with the disguised wolf. The wolf's role, particularly in the Grimms and Perrault versions, is to punish the young woman for venturing into unknown territory. By doing so, she obtains sinister knowledge about the appetites of adult men, demystifying their honourable standing and surrendering her idyllic sexual ignorance. For the Grimms and Perrault, this a punishable offence that results in Red's devourment.[5] Yet in earlier versions of Red Riding Hood, acquiring sexual knowledge and awareness of the dangers of men is a confronting but necessary rite of passage, and the heroines of these oral variations often emerged triumphant without aid (Warner, 1995). As Catherine Driscoll (2002) states, "The horror film is a discourse on knowledge," predicated on destabilising the

[5] While David's appetite for the flesh of young girls parallels the fairy tale wolf, the threat of "chopping" Ellie into "tiny pieces" also mirrors the gory fate of Bluebeard's inquisitive wives. In both tales, Bluebeard's wife and Red are presented as wickedly disobedient, which is granted greater emphasis than the issue of gendered violence (Tatar, 2021; Warner, 1995, p. 243).

"the innocence or naïveté of the central girl" whose "final triumph is a transformation aligned with adolescence" (p. 230). The previous chapter's discussion of *Life Is Strange* also addresses a girls' acquiring of confronting gendered knowledge. Although the horror genre, distinct from *Life Is Strange*'s melancholic quasi-realism, communicates this knowledge through fantasies of extreme excess. The presence of fairy tale themes in horror therefore reacquaints players with the disturbing yet transformative wisdom that was passed on in early fairy tales, where sinister realities were conveyed through fantastic monsters, bodily horrors, and magic spells. Similar to the fiction of storytelling, the safe arena of videogames, as Mortensen and Jørgensen (2020) suggest, allows players to interact with and manage that knowledge.

Entering blindly into the woods may have led to Ellie's dangerous ordeal, but the intention of this sequence is not to admonish girls against wandering out on their own. The winter chapter instead draws attention to the game's monsters that are inspired by reality rather than fantasy; the ones that appear in the ordinary guise of men like David—this too, is a classic trope of zombie-horror. The focus lies not with behavioural regulation, but on Ellie's wit, tenacity, and unaided survival. Ellie's "Oh" therefore does not linger for long. She cunningly responds to David's advance by holding his gaze while placing her hand upon his. Her false act of surrender tames the wolf to a temporary submission, brilliantly granting her the opportunity to break his finger. This prompts his own façade of kindness to shatter: "You stupid little girl! […] What am I supposed to tell the others now?" Having finally lured him to shed his disguise, Ellie finally discloses her name: "Ellie. Tell them that Ellie is the *little girl* that broke your fucking finger."

The player does not actively participate in the game's cut scenes, yet Ellie's satisfying defiance emboldens players to then take over and slay the monster. By striking back at her captors, Ellie is able to flee their grasp, prompting control to be transferred back to the player. Players must then stealthily manoeuvre through David's company of men as they hunt Ellie through the cabin resort. Players are unarmed, however, and so must grapple with one of these men in order to acquire a weapon. Their limited supply of ammo further contributes to this sequence's 'survival' horror convention of gaming, as players are outnumbered and disempowered. It is difficult but not impossible to reach the other side of the cabin resort. Crucially, players are required to readjust how they would usually play as Joel as they no longer have the

option of hand-to-hand combat nor the range of his various weapons. In this sense then, players are likewise participating in Ellie's cunning and resourcefulness.

This is most clear when Ellie reaches the bistro. She is confined within by David who resumes his predatory pursuit. If players directly approach David to attack, they will be overpowered and required to restart the sequence. Her limited physical strength—when compared to Joel's—does not mean, however, that she is inept from protecting herself. To overcome David, players must remain low and approach him from behind. Picking up and throwing bottles or bricks work well to distract or stun him, allowing players the chance to approach unseen. If they fail to approach unseen, David attacks Ellie and players must restart the sequence. Ludic horror therefore echoes what Schubart (2018) describes in cinema as viewers remembering a character's actions when they die.

As discussed earlier, Schubart (2018) likens this process to play fighting in the animal kingdom, which is "a safe place to learn things like survival skills" (p. 3). When considering horror in this way, the legacies of fairy tales become strikingly visible, as the transmission of survival skills were precisely the ethos of many early oral variations (Tatar, 2021). Schubart raises the applicability of survival horror videogames in her book, though she does not hone in on the medium's remarkable pertinence. When roleplaying a character, as is a common convention of videogames, the player's "spirit" enters the horror setting (Ndalianis, 2012). When playing the sequence in the bistro, players are more directly confronted with the challenging emotions of horror, among which Schubart (2018) identifies as fear, disgust, and anger. The players themselves must learn to survive David, which becomes an effective means of managing those emotions.

They learn to survive by experimenting with the spatial layout; discovering where best to conceal themselves, or perhaps finding that its best to keep moving. Then players learn to fight back through trial and error. For instance, he had seen them approach, so next time distract him with a glass bottle. Play is hence a promising avenue for "mastering fear"—and teen girls are in fact already aware of this. In a 2005 study that tasked a group of pre-teen girls to design games, the most prominent type were ones designed to work through their fears (Denner et al., 2005). While the fears ranged from violence to getting in trouble, the girls from Denner et al.'s study recognised the possibilities of play in confronting their anxieties.

The bistro challenge is ultimately mastered through a successful attack on David. A clumsy grapple between the two ensues, which transitions to a cut scene that integrates the player's input. In the scene, David straddles Ellie's body, while players are instructed to rapidly press the 'triangle' button on their controller to reach for his machete. Once retrieving the weapon, Ellie strikes him and then sits atop *his* body. She proceeds to repeatedly hack at his face in an unrelenting fury. Just like the heroine in Angela Carter's (1979/2016) "The Company of Wolves": "She knew she was nobody's meat" (p. 199). Ellie's hacking persists until Joel enters the bistro and removes her from David.

Throughout the winter chapter players would periodically be transferred to Joel's perspective as he searches for Ellie through the cannibal's community. Joel fails to arrive in time, though, while Ellie proves that she is capable of subduing David without his assistance. The build-up to his unrequired rescue undermines the benevolent male saviour motif embraced by printed fairy tales (and that is also undermined in *Life Is Strange*). The objective to rescue a woman has been notably identified as a problematic trope in videogames, famously observed in Anita Sarkeesian's "Damsel in Distress" videos (2013a; 2013b). The male rescuer figure in fairy tales serves to restore and reinforce the heroic image of men. Placing the heroines at the passive mercy of male rescue also highlights the transgressive nature of their actions, for they have stepped into precarious situations that they are not capable of resolving on their own. The presentation of ineffective male rescue is a theme that Clover (1992) also locates within slasher films. She links these figures to a critique of fairy tales by dubbing them "would-be 'woodsmen'" (Clover, 1992, p. 38). The knowledge acquired in these rite of passage tales is therefore not solely a warning that any man may be hiding a sinister appetite, but also to demystify the expectation of a capable male saviour (Short, 2007, p. 32). It is clear then that *The Last of Us*, which borrows themes and iconography from horror, participates in the genre's critical recontextualisation of fairy tale myths. At the same time, it also demonstrates an awareness of the medium's own troubled history of perpetuating female passivity.

The brutality of Ellie's slaying moreover demonstrates the heroine's subversive perpetration of violence that may be celebrated in rape revenge but is comparatively contained in a number of slashers. As Short (2007) contends, the killing enacted by Final Girls is celebrated so long as it remains within the acceptable boundaries of self-

defence. She cites films like *Carrie*, *Jennifer's Body*, and *Ginger Snaps* as examples of excessively violent girls that are eventually punished by death. Ellie's slaying of David is likewise chaotic, excessive, and borders on transgressively cathartic. Yet the sombre non-diegetic music that overlays her triumph discourages players from fully sharing in the gratification; compounded by the fact that they are watching her fury in a cut scene rather than enacting it themselves.

Grotesque violence is framed especially disturbing when perpetrated by young girls (Richards, 2015).[6] At the same time, girls are precisely drawn to horror because of its representations of transgressive female violence, regardless of the heroines' downfall as eventuated in the films listed above. Ellie's slaying borders on disturbing excess before she is contained by Joel. While Joel's role in the winter chapter is not to rescue Ellie from David, he does function to obstruct her extreme killing. Joel rescues Ellie instead from becoming monstrous herself. The game therefore resists unleashing Ellie's full bestial potential by deploying a male figure to contain her violence. His obstruction restores the status-quo and his paternal authority, which is ludically projected when players are returned to Joel's perspective for most of the game's remainder. That is not to say that Ellie's ordeal holds no transformative power. On the contrary, horrors often return to normalcy in their conclusions, yet audiences exit the text retaining the subversions exposed (see Cherry, 1999/2002; Short, 2007), which is also an effect discussed in the previous chapter.

Regardless of the sequence's resolute containment of Ellie's rage, the winter chapter itself offers an empowering and challenging experience of a girl's cunning and fierce survival. Ellie attains confronting yet necessary adult knowledge by wandering into unfamiliar territory. Coupled with her triumphant capacity for self-defence, this sequence dissolves the gendered ideologies cemented in Western print fairy tales. The winter chapter effectively updates their values through its engagement with horror, as this genre recentres a heroine's fierce resilience against monstrous, patriarchal threats. The game is hence a transformative space for girl players to practice fear and

[6] Chris Richards (2015) discusses David Slade's *Hard Candy* (2005) and the film's unsettling effect of its own violent girl avenger as being informed by the social expectations of her youth and gender. Like the film's Hayley, Ellie challenges the assumption that girls are weak and passive victims with only pure moral intent, thus her violence "as a teenage girl […] appears to be so improbable" (Richards, 2015, p. 54). Interestingly, Hayley is performed by Elliot Page, who has contributed to claims that Naughty Dog borrowed his likeness for Ellie (Pitcher, 2013), although Naughty Dog have maintained that any likeness is a coincidence (Welsh, 2012).

to confront—and triumph over—troubling knowledge, establishing what Schubart (2018) describes in her work on horror spaces and what Mortensen and Jørgensen (2020) observe in transgressive game spaces; although more of the latter will be discussed in the following section. The space facilitates the girl player's own performance of resistance and survival through its on-screen character Ellie.

Describing this sequence establishes a point of contrast between Ellie's slaying of David to her vengeful killing spree in *Part II*. In *Part I*'s winter chapter, Ellie acquires the troubling knowledge of gendered sexual violence, and through the game's systems, players learn to fiercely survive. But the game conveys Ellie's resilience without radically departing from the game's overall patriarchal normalcy, which is restored by the end of the sequence. While Joel's rescue is unnecessary, he nevertheless arrives in time to suppress Ellie from breaching acceptable self-defence to gratifying excess. This is precisely the transgressive boundary that Ellie ruptures after his death in *Part II*.

The Heroine Hunter: Playing the Wolf

If *Part I* provides a space for enacting resilience and survival against a predatory monster, *Part II* offers a space to *become* one. In the series' second instalment, Ellie's trauma of witnessing Joel's brutal murder is manifested into a quest for retributive justice. Joel's death in *Part II* is a catalyst for the violent rage she enacts, although his lie in *Part I*, which she uncovers some time later, contributes greatly to her anger. Her capacity to fiercely inflict violence was also established prior to *Part II* and is therefore not simply in response to Joel's killers. As outlined in the previous section, the world's hostility to young women had already necessitated violence upon others. Her killing in *Part II*, however, is remarkably intensified. Her furious hacking is no longer confined to a cut scene but shared with the player's interactive input. Her violence is often actively sought out rather than exclusively self-defence and is exhibited with even more gruesome spectacle. There is a potential for subversive pleasure for players identifying with anger.

Within the videogame medium, so deeply entrenched in misogyny, marginal players are liable to employ what Brigid Cherry (1999/2002) terms "feminine interpretive strategies" (p. 176), or what Sue Short (2007) identifies as a "gymnastic

ability to identify with improbable objects of affection" (p. 160). Cherry and Short are referring to female horror audiences that locate desirable figures of resistance—be it Final Girls or monsters—within texts that nevertheless restore the social status-quo. Even though the monsters are subdued, the status-quo has still been challenged. The triple-A sector of videogames remains in the process of opening itself up to explicitly feminist ludo-narratives. While *Part I* unsettles traditional regulations of feminine behaviour within an otherwise hegemonic game, *Part II* upends structures of femininity even further, experimenting with the intersections of girlhood, queerness, extreme emotions, and horrific violence. The game presents Ellie's violence as a tragic descent into immorality and deploys various strategies to elicit guilt in the player for their participation. At same the time though, and indeed more conceptually, Ellie intensely breaches the boundaries of feminine behaviour, utterly denying the player from stepping into a traditionally heroic role. There is certainly a transgressive pleasure to be found in enacting a young queer woman's rage and vengeance upon a cruel world that constantly tests her survival.

In *Part II*, Ellie is not driven by self-defence but rather by her uncompromising grief under the guise of pursuing justice for Joel. Rather than killing for survival, her killing burgeons more destruction. While white male violence is a normalised staple across popular media genres, female violence unsettles precisely because it challenges women's presumed passivity (Halberstam 1993). Male violence occupies a central role in mainstream drama and action genres, yet graphic female violence is often confined to the intentionally unsettling horror genre. Ellie's retributive hunt takes on an animalistic character and in effect blurs the distinction between girl and monster. In the context of my fairy tale reading then, players now step into the pleasurable role of the wolf, who is no longer a male-coded predator but a female avenger. This subversive figure shares characteristics with the Final Girl, for she refuses victimisation, but I rather liken her to the fierce avengers of rape revenge horror.

Heroines of rape revenge respond to their trauma through predatory retribution. Just like a wolf, they actively track, stalk, and commit violence upon their prey. This course of action be can located in female-led revenge films like *I Spit on Your Grave* (Zarchi, 1978), *Enough* (Apted, 2002), *Return to Sender* (Mikati, 2015), *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Oplev, 2009), and *Kill Bill*: *Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2* (Tarantino, 2003, 2004). While Ellie is not a victim of rape in *Part II*, she nevertheless

embraces the hatred born of her trauma through a primal commitment to vengeance. This represents a transgressive alternative to victimisation. Far then from merely substituting the usual male perpetrator to female, Halberstam (1993) argues that female violence has transformative social power. It would indeed be reductive to suggest that the usual male predator has merely undertaken a gender-swap. This would regressively overlook the gendered sexual violence that David represents and the transformative potential of active female rage. By *doing violence*, female avengers contest the assumption that women only have violence *done to them*.

Although the female wolf is rarer than the wolf's usual coding as male, she is frequently framed as a liberated agent. Her animal side gives her the freedom to operate outside of oppressive societal constraints (Schubart, 2019; Short 2007). According to Schubart (2018), a girl's werewolf transformation is rather a blessing than a curse, for the wolf woman's primal aggression contests compulsory femininity and her conceivable victimisation. Schubart's work echoes Short's (2007) own descriptive, who writes that the girl wolf enjoys "forbidden emotions," from "power, lust, and rage" (p. 37) to "carnality and violence" (p. 16). These two theorists take actual werewolf girls for their analyses, like Ginger from the film *Ginger Snaps*. Ellie, however, does not experience a lycanthropic transformation. She rather better resembles the animalistic desire portrayed in Angela Carter's (1979/2016) earlier mentioned Red Riding Hood stories *"Wolf-Alice"* and "The Company of Wolves."[7] Ellie's monstrous animalism is signalled by her hunting and primal violence. She is led by her extreme emotions of pain and anger, relentlessly stalking and killing her prey as well as any who stand in her path. Ellie's actions ultimately compromise her ties to her civilised community.

Most significantly, those actions are carried out by the player. The game is therefore a space to practice what Short (2007) calls the "forbidden emotions" of rage and aggression while navigating the especially dark and frightening game world. To progress, players must enact Ellie's retribution, which is at once both uncomfortable and transgressively pleasurable. Mortensen and Jørgensen (2020) identify the measures players undertake to endure uncomfortable videogames. They draw on Jaakko Stenros' (2015) typology of transgressive play states to identify players' motivations of progressing through games that incite negative feelings. Among these

[7] Carter's (1979/2016) third Red Riding Hood story "The Werewolf" does feature a female werewolf

states are *paratelic* and *parapathic*. A paratelic motivation refers to the protective psychological mindset that assures the player that the dangers are fictional. Their experience within the game space thereby produces "excitement rather than anxiety" (Mortensen & Jørgensen, 2020, p. 108). Players in this state "pretend to believe that this is real in the context of the staged situation," albeit with the overarching knowledge that it is fictional and therefore safe (Mortensen & Jørgensen, 2020, p. 108).

Mortensen and Jørgensen (2020, pp. 108–110) link the paratelic state to the parapathic, which Stenros (2015) distinguishes as a state of play motivated not necessarily for fun but to achieve a meaningful experience. It relates to the player's relationship with the game space and its fiction as well as their identification with its protagonist (Mortensen & Jørgensen, 2020). The parapathic state therefore results in a heightened emotional or personal engagement. This consequently establishes a productive rehearsal grounds for managing challenging feelings and scenarios. A motivational framing is useful to understanding the spatial affordances of a horror text in relation to the player's personal learning experience. Pleasure is derived from the rewarding sensation of managing the game's difficult content.

The adoption of Stenros' states parallels Schubart's (2018) own reading of horror as a productive space to explore uncomfortable emotions like fear. The horror transgressions from both of these perspectives, however, are shaped to be *endured, overcome,* or *"mastered"* (Schubart, 2018). They hence reflect the instructive purposes of traditional fairy tales, myths, and fables. These approaches, though, leave little room for comprehending the pleasurable motivation of performing transgressions themselves—although Schubart does emphasise the productive exposure of alternative femininities. My discussion of *Part II* is therefore also a postmodern reading of Red Riding Hood, wherein chaotic and subversive pleasure emerges when the tale comes into contact with horror and videogames.

These pleasures are experienced through the player's active participation in Ellie's retribution. Players are tasked with a dangerous traversal across the game's post-apocalyptic Seattle setting to hunt and kill Joel's killer Abby as well as Abby's companions who were present at his death. The violence in *Part II* is more sinister and gruesome than the series' previous instalments. When performing stealth attacks, for instance, blood sprays dramatically and visceral noises, like a person choking on their

own blood, are notably intensified. The killing is inscribed with far more spectacle than in *Part I*, which was comparatively less extreme. As mentioned earlier, when Ellie's violence bordered on disturbing, the action was detached from the player through a cut scene, which is no longer the case in *Part II*. Ellie now murmurs callous lines like "Shut it" as players stealthily take down human enemies. They are also positioned to shoot, stab, or beat to death an enemy on their knees in surrender. In the previous section I mentioned Denner et al.'s (2005) study wherein pre-teen girls designed games to work through their fears. Caroline Cunningham (2018) relatedly also summarises of one of her girl interviewees: "[S]he liked video games because they allow you to do things you couldn't do in the real world, 'like get away with murder'" (p. 58). Qualitative interviews with young girls, like those carried out by Cunningham, strengthen our insight into how girls might embrace brutality in games.

In *Part II*, Ellie's animalistic violence is most frequently transmitted through the players' hunting and stalking. Similar to the winter chapter, Ellie's petite size characterises her movement, and is knowingly used to her advantage when sneaking. She is still small at age nineteen and hence light on her feet, so players are encouraged to crouch, crawl, and wait quietly in the shadows. A prominent aspect of play is patiently lurking within tall grass, beneath vehicles, behind walls, furniture, or other large objects in order to watch and listen for enemies or the infected.

A dedicated button ('R1') activates a mechanic called 'listen mode,' which allows players to observe the silhouettes of nearby opponents that are otherwise hidden from view behind walls or objects. This mode encourages players to remain hidden until an enemy wanders away from their companions. The player can then emerge and strike silently with Ellie's switchblade. This feature is fairly central to the series as a whole, although it becomes more sinister in *Part II* as Ellie is more active in her pursuit. Similar stealth mechanics have long been featured in action videogames—a major example being the *Metal Gear Solid* series (Kojima Productions, 1998–2018)—though few of these are through the perspective of a teen girl. The stealth sequences in *Part II* play out as more subversive and predatory. In this sense, the player is roleplaying the monster from horror, picking off one victim at a time once they are separated from the others.

While navigating a given area, players, depending on their skill set, will often feel compelled to remove all enemies before progressing to the next area, despite this

being optional. Killing all enemies produces a transgressively rewarding sensation (colloquially dubbed a 'completionist' mode of playing) while also enabling players to freely explore for ammo, parts for weapon upgrades, materials for crafting, or world-building artefacts. Players may also choose to draw out all enemies at once when entering an area 'guns blazing,' which often even involves wrestling with enemies' trained hounds. The lack of resources, like ammo and health packs, however, limits the sustainability of adopting this approach all the time, particularly when playing on higher difficulty settings. Players also have the option to sneak through an area without killing any people at all, although again, this is determined by skill. The average player is likely to employ a variation of these approaches. The player's fascinating position as monstrous hunter is nonetheless prevalent.

There are moments in the game where Ellie's monstrous stalking is especially central. This is when Ellie comes closest to her targets, notably Abby's companions, Nora, Mel, and Owen. When pursuing Nora, for instance, Ellie watches her from above while hiding in a ceiling ventilation shaft. She then pursues her at sprint-speed through the building, forcing Nora into a lower level infused with infectious air-borne spores from which Ellie is immune. The backup power supply on the lower levels elicits an unholy red glow as Ellie then patrols to find her. The steady heartbeat thumps underscoring the looming non-diegetic soundtrack further heighten the tension. During this sequence, Ellie's predatory hunt is on peak display, as is the way the game draws on horror conventions.

The tenacity of Ellie's hunt is further expressed when she approaches the aquarium. This is the site that Nora unwillingly discloses to be Abby's location. Ellie first leaves her friend Jesse behind in her pursuit. They learn of Joel's brother Tommy's location, who is also seeking vengeance for Joel. Jesse insists he and Ellie divert to his aid to which she rather callously replies, "He can take care of himself." Jesse's disapproval is clear—"Jesus Christ"—and he leaves Ellie to continue her pursuit. Like the lone wolf archetype, she prefers to hunt alone. Ellie acquires a speed boat to reach the aquarium as the building is located through a flooded area of the city. She refuses to allow the increasingly vicious storm, nor the boat's failing engine to prevent her from reaching her goal, even when she must swim the remainder of the way through waves that violently knock her about. As she moves through the contrastingly quiet aquarium, Ellie anxiously mutters, "Abby, where are you?" and

further in, becoming desperate, "Where the fuck are you?!" As when hunting Nora, the sequence is ruled by tension. The repetition of two notes again resembles a thumping heartbeat, overlayed by cracks of thunder. The electricity in the aquarium is limited, prompting players to equip their flashlight to navigate the visually obscured premises. The dark shadows, the dampness, and the flickering lights contribute to the sequence's heightened paranoia and horror aesthetics.

In the aquarium, Ellie encounters more of Abby's companions: Owen and Mel. Despite her advising, "You guys can survive this, I just need her [Abby]," Owen knowingly proclaims, "Bullshit." Owen is likely accurate in assuming the inevitability of his and Mel's deaths. Ellie demonstrated her mercilessness with her treatment of Nora, whom she doomed before questioning by exposing her to the air-borne spores. Nora's declaration, "I'm fucking dead anyway, why would I tell you anything?" echoes Owen's distrust of Ellie. Despite Owen attacking Ellie first, it is difficult to conceive that their deaths were not inevitable. Like Jennifer in *I Spit on Your Grave* and The Bride in *Kill Bill Vol. 1* and *Vol 2.*, Ellie seeks to pick off each individual responsible for her trauma, even keeping photos of each one at her base for reference.

Nora's death, however, is troubling rather than pleasurable. Already drawing from a number of horror conventions, the series also participates in horror's "Black Person Dies First" trope (see Bethea, 2020). This is where black characters are problematically sacrificed to further the story-arcs of white characters. It also reinforces the harmful hypervisibility of black death across broader forms of screen media (see Gray, 2020). Players may identify with Ellie's ravenous stalking and killing on their way through waves of enemies *towards* Nora, but Nora's death itself continues the series' troubling repetition of violently and tragically killing its only black characters, as seen in the deaths of Sam, Henry, and Marleen in *Part I*, and Riley's in the DLC *Left Behind*. Within the fictional horror space, performing violence has the potential to derive subversive pleasure, although the space is not exempt from real world politics and racial realities. Naughty Dog's repetition of black death is rooted in semiotic racism. Nora's death, along with Owen and Mel's, is in place to further the game's white protagonist Ellie's character trajectory.

Ellie's character trajectory is represented as a dark descent. She transitions from the tough tomboy of the first game into a brutal avenger. Often the tomboy girl in coming-of-age texts is required to be tamed—"as if she were a wild animal" (Creed,

1995, p.95)—in order to progress towards an approved form of womanhood. Ellie, however, nurtures her wild persona. Border-crossing, from civilisation to the wild, from human to monster, is celebrated in horror and other postmodern fairy tales like Angela Carter's (1979/2016) short stories. Linking tomboyism to queerness, to which Ellie conforms, Barbara Creed (1995) notes a tendency for associating lesbian figures as "distinct from the civilised" and hence "a part of the natural world" (p. 98). The natural foliage enveloping the ruins of the game's Seattle setting, amplify the game's uncivilised context. The streets have become flooded streams and forests; the multi-levelled buildings and subway like the labyrinths of caves.

Ellie does not seem to be secure in herself and her surroundings at the start of *Part II* until she exits her community's walled boundaries. For the player, their movement is slower and their actions are essentially limited to walking and running. Moreover, it is not until outside of these walls that she can openly explore her relationship with Dina, free from the homophobia present in their community (I have drawn little attention to Ellie's queerness until now primarily because her queer status was not canonised until after *Part I*). Notwithstanding the homophobic foundations of correlating the lesbian with nature, Creed (1995) points out that the animalistic figuration is rather received by certain audiences as "immensely appealing" (p. 98).

Queer rage and monstrosity are politically pleasing in games because the player is engaging in a performance that refuses the Other's regulation. In his examination of carnivalesque queer theatre, Jordan Schildcrout (2014) writes that society convicts queer gender and sexuality as "monstrous" and strives to "contain the monster by keeping it in the closet" (p. 101). Halberstam's (1995) earlier analyses of gothic film and literature attests to this, where he finds fictional monsters to be technologies of Othering along the axis of class, race, nationality, politics, gender, and sexuality. For Schildcrout (2014), representations of uncontained queer rage and violence thereby "offer a space in which the monster can run free" (p. 101). While *The Last of Us* series takes itself too seriously to qualify as carnivalesque, and is more horror than gothic, it nevertheless functions to undermine the status-quo through excess, spectacle, and extremity. This is achieved through the player's enactment of primal desires, like rage and violence, effectively unsettling the containment of non-normative sexuality and gender performance.

Videogame and horror spaces have been perceived as productive grounds for managing uncomfortable and extreme emotions (Mortensen & Jørgensen, 2020; Schubart, 2018). These insights may be extended, however, to include their possible function as a space for queer performances of resistance and frustration. Players who identify as queer or gendered minorities are given a space to partake in a forbidden fantasy of violent discontent. Those with dominant identities, meanwhile, may be exposed to what Halberstam (1993) terms a "productive fear" (p. 195) over the destabilisation of hegemonic norms.

It is necessary to remember that these violences are occurring within the limits of fantasy. The violence itself is not endorsed but its representation works to challenge reality. As Halberstam (1993) writes, "Fantasy, the safest sex of all, avoids physical contamination but it contaminates nonetheless" (p. 194). Angela Carter (1979/2016) too recognises this potential in her own fairy tale retellings: "I really do believe that a fiction absolutely self-conscious of itself as a different form of human experience than reality […] can help to transform reality itself" (p. xii). Fiction and fantasy are liminal spaces embedded with transformative potential. Horror in particular, in all its excess and chaos, truly encapsulates Turner's (1969) "anti-structure." *Part II* hence offers a fantasy space to enact primal rage through a queer teenage heroine.

The motivation to play therefore invokes, yet ventures beyond, the paratelic or parapathic mindsets. It is safe to engage with Ellie's difficult emotions and violent actions within the fictional space (paratelic state), and a meaningful experience emerges through both protagonists' redemptive story arcs and the game's progressive efforts towards representational diversity (parapathic state). For other players though, performing transgressions themselves can be transgressively pleasurable. Playing the wolf takes on a more nuanced dimension when considered through the lens of queer theory. Ellie's monstrosity is not limited to challenging conservative gendered scripts, but also stands to challenge the containment of non-normative desire more broadly.

One final observation of *Part II* is Ellie's unconventional ability to come of age despite her transgressions. While the rape revenge genre indeed permits its avenging heroines to survive, these are usually adult women. Monstrous teen girls in horror are rarely allowed to survive for they have not completed their initiation correctly (Short, 2007). Short (2007) cites *Ginger Snaps*, *Jennifer's Body*, and *Carrie* as examples of punished "misfits," usually subdued by a more morally upright character. *Part II*,

however, softens the blow of this tragic convention by permitting Ellie to decide her own fate. After the final confrontation between Ellie and Abby, Ellie, in a cut scene, makes the decision to stop fighting and to allow Abby to leave. Ellie is left to sit alone in the shallows of a grimy beach. This bleak shot starkly contrasts from the winter chapter's closure where she is warmly embraced by Joel (the subduing agent). In the absence of anyone successfully able to contain her violence in *Part II*, Ellie, however, is still permitted to come of age (unlike transgressive figures like Chloe in *Life Is Strange*'s presumed 'canon' ending). Ellie's walking away demonstrates her capacity for ongoing growth and the availability of a future.

Crucially, Ellie's conclusion is not the result of external containment or fatal self-destruction. While prompted by a memory of Joel, it was nonetheless Ellie's decision to let Abby go. *Part II* therefore only somewhat restores normativity—in its relative sense—by concluding its heroine's animalistic quest for vengeance. Ellie's retributive violence nonetheless exposes players to the pleasures and power of female and queer rage. Her ability to come of age meanwhile indicates a more generous empathy towards her actions than her condemned teen girl cinematic predecessors. She is instead aligned with the adult women of rape revenge who often triumphantly survive.

Ellie's relationship with the future throughout the entire series is fraught. In *Part I* she is a beacon of civilisation's future though at the cost of her own. Ellie was willing to sacrifice herself before Joel's violent intervention, and in *Part II*, she continues to reject her future through her recklessly dangerous—and far less benevolent—revenge quest. But Ellie also rejects her future when she walks away from her idyllic home with Dina and their child in order to continue her pursuit of Abby; presented in a sequence towards the end of the game that would otherwise have signalled Ellie's postliminal conclusion. In this sense, Ellie, like Alex in *Oxenfree*, may also be interpreted as "growing sideways" (Stockton, 2009). As discussed in chapter two through Lee Edelman (2004) and Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009), Ellie's coming-of-age trajectory does not lead to a hegemonic or heteronormative postliminal fate. In many ways then, Ellie opposes the notion that childhood or adolescence leads to the continuation of society and its hegemonic systems.

After the conclusion of her revenge quest, it is unclear whether Ellie ever returns to her walled community. Able to come of age and pursue her own future, the closing scene depicts Ellie re-entering the woods and its unknown wilds.

Conclusion

Young women's survival has been a key theme of early fairy tales that has persisted through to contemporary horror. Survival in a slasher looks quite different than survival in a rape revenge, yet both subject positions of hunted and hunter characterise Ellie's coming-of-age trajectory. Survival has always been a prevalent element of videogames, where so often to "fail" means the failure to keep the character on screen alive. New meanings emerge when survival is considered in Girlhood Games, particularly in a horror series like *The Last of Us*.

The horror genre has long represented animalistic women (Short, 2007, p. 100). It thus represents a promising space for outcast members of society to express discontent, to engage with fictional trauma, and to explore extreme emotions. The violent spectacle of rage fascinates because it challenges the status-quo's compulsion to contain. In *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, Clarissa Pinkola Estés (1992) writes that certain stories are "soul vitamins" for they may "lead us back to our own real lives as knowing wildish women" (pp. 18–19). Animalistic girls refuse regulation, polite decorum, and a cultural narrative of victimisation. This chapter has considered the transformative potential of horror Girlhood Games by drawing on the themes that the horror genre borrows and appropriates from fairy tale traditions. Horror spaces in the videogame format enable players to participate more actively in their confronting content. Through an engagement with Schubart (2018) and Mortensen and Jørgensen (2020), I have shown how these spaces enable players to explore and manage frightening scenarios and difficult emotions, as well as the subversive pleasure of enacting an animalistic performance.

Through the presence of Red Riding Hood themes, *The Last of Us* series demonstrates the development of gendered narrative traditions. In the horror videogame series, Ellie recaptures the tale's spirit of survival, while also dramatically subverting the ideological teachings of the tale's print production. This approach to

The Last of Us moves away from its frequent engagement with paternal themes, and instead considers the series as a girls' coming-of-age story.

Ellie is an appealing teen videogame heroine because she exemplifies a myriad of transgressions that intensify as she ages. In turn, the central focus of this chapter has been her capacity for violence and the transgressive pleasures that emerge from roleplaying such a character. From slaying the wolf to playing the wolf, players come to embody an alternative discourse of girlhood that is ruled by a fantasy of rage and anarchic retaliation. It is only a shame that the series' R18+ rating in Australia limits its potential exposure to a wider collection of teen girl players.

5. Self-Representation: Girls' Bedrooms and DIY Games Culture

Secret Little Haven and *Lost Memories Dot Net*

Introduction

This final chapter takes a rather dramatic pivot from the excesses of horror discussed in the preceding analysis. The previous three chapters have examined how various forms of girlhood are represented through a selection of videogames. Yet an important question remains: how do girls represent *themselves* through videogames? This is a broad question that could no doubt lead to its own future study. The many avenues to consider range from modding and machinima to live streaming and esports. In keeping with this thesis' focus on game texts, though, I turn my attention now to games that centre on girls as cultural producers and that are designed to encourage players' self-expression through creative design components, by which I mean experimental, crafting, and DIY mechanics. Taking on the question of self-representation, this analysis finds that Girlhood Games can both reflect and foster girls' cultural production.

The two games I discuss, Hummingwarp Interactive's *Secret Little Haven* (2018) and Star Maid Games' *Lost Memories Dot Net* (2017), both celebrate girls as cultural producers. Beyond a textual analysis of the games, I also offer a brief history of girls' early videogame DIY practices. Girls' early DIY practices are represented in the two games and so a history first helps to contextualise them. More importantly, the games effectively raise awareness to the invisible histories they represent. In this sense, they prompt a reconsideration of hegemonic sites of gaming culture, extending DIY practices beyond coding and hacking by addressing overlooked practices and spaces heavily populated by girls, like web design, fanlistings, and dollmaking. In this chapter I also consider the independent design contexts of the two games. I discuss how the independent games industry cultivates the self-expression of individual

creators, allowing for diverse voices and perspectives to enter videogame production. These perspectives in turn diversify the themes of games themselves, as seen through the many independent Girlhood Games listed in the introductory chapter.

Throughout this chapter, I use the terms *self-expression* and *self-representation* interchangeably as one's voice or ideas shared through creative expression is interrelated to how one's identity is presented. I also coin the term *techno-femininity* to describe the exaggerated expressions of femininity and "girlie" interface designs present in both the games and throughout my history of girls' early online gaming cultures. The term refers to the intersection of femininity and technology, both hardware and software. While femininity is an historically ambivalent concept, charged with controversy and a range of varied interpretations (see Hudson, 1984), I treat it here as a hyper-inflation of Western gendered stereotypes that girls knowingly engage with and draw pleasure from.

I identify techno-femininity through "girlie" aesthetics, such as warm colours, like pink, or "cute," "sparkly" graphics, but also through gendered traditions translated on screen, like writing in a journal or dressing up dolls. Techno-femininity is related to how girl agency and expression is cultivated through technologies like the internet. While the term is connected with the feminist "cybertwee" movement—derived from "cyberpunk"—I employ "techno-femininity" because it is not strictly rooted in political resistance.[1] It may also be located within mainstream and postfeminist contexts.[2]

In addition to historical revision, this closing chapter situates self-representation as another significant possible function of Girlhood Games. I consider how self-representation works through the case studies in three ways: (1) First is the representation of girl characters that participate in creative practices. These characters promote possible subjectivities of girls as cultural producers; a concept that particularly builds from chapter three's discussion of Max's photography in *Life Is Strange*. (2) Second is the girl player's opportunities for their own creative practices when roleplaying as these characters. Such opportunities are made especially possible

[1] See cybertwee.net

[2] A similar concept and terminology has also been applied in Abidin and Thompson's (2012) study on women's "blogshops," where they term the online gendered performances of the female models as "cyber-femininities." While related to my own comprehension of gendered online expression, I have elected the prefix "tech-" instead of "cyber-" because it encompasses a broader range of technological gendered mediation beyond the internet, allowing the inclusion of hardware objects too.

within games that incorporate design experimentation as a play feature. (3) Third is the practice of cultural production demonstrated by the independent game developer themself. For the purpose of this study, I limit my consideration of developer self-expression to the context of Girlhood Games that draw on the developer's own experiences.

Secret Little Haven (hereafter *SLH*) and *Lost Memories Dot Net* (hereafter *LMDN*) both demonstrate a complex convergence of these themes. The two games employ a computer desktop as their sole game space and are both set in the earlier years of internet: *SLH* is set in 1999 and *LMDN* is set in 2004. Players in both games roleplay a teenage girl navigating her identity and social dilemmas while chatting to their friends on instant messenger as they simultaneously explore the recently domesticated World Wide Web. While jumping between conversations, players are encouraged to explore the various web pages and desktop applications, and in both games the protagonists are drawn particularly to fandom spaces. In *LMDN* players are encouraged to design their own web page and in *SLH*, they may dress up dolls and optionally write their own fan fiction. The games' reflections of the past contribute to a counternarrative of girls' presumed lack of interest in computers at the time of the games' settings, as discussed in chapter one.

Discussing these two case studies helps to address how girls might represent and express themselves through videogames as either players of games with design mechanics, as gamemakers, or through other forms of games-adjacent cultural production. I therefore argue in this chapter that Girlhood Games may function to reflect girls' cultural production. The two games present a possibility space in which both players' and developers' self-representation may be mapped. Prior to a discussion of the games, however, it is first useful to contextualise girls' histories of cultural production, particularly beginning with works that emerged from and address the context that the games recall. The two games represent an invisible history of how girls' bedroom culture is related to videogame DIY culture. The first section of this chapter will thus elaborate on girls' bedroom cultures, rewriting presumptions that traditionally associate videogame hacking and DIY practices with boyhood by instead identifying alternative girl-populated spaces.

Girl's DIY Bedroom Culture: 1990s and 2000s

The bedroom has long stood as a key site for girls' culture, also known as "bedroom culture" and this notion is present in the Girlhood Games discussed throughout the thesis. *Life Is Strange* developer Dontnod Entertainment, for instance, chose to share a sequence set in Chloe's bedroom when previewing the game to potential publishers. The developers shared that they wanted to emphasise their game's girlhood subject matter because *Life Is Strange*, at its core, is about a connection between two girls. Images of Chloe's bedroom also opened both the announcement and launch trailers of its prequel *Life Is Strange: Before the* Storm, further highlighting the significance of the setting. A girl's bedroom is, ideally, a private sanctuary, free from the scrutiny of the public domain. It is where a girl may be free to populate the space with personal artefacts and decorations that express her interests, hobbies, and aesthetic preferences. Inviting publishers and players into Chloe's bedroom when previewing *Life Is Strange* and *Before the Storm* thus prefigures the games' interest in intimately engaging with its girl characters' inner lives.

Bedroom culture's association with girls emerged from Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber's (1978/1991) influential essay on girls' participation in post-war British youth subcultures. McRobbie and Garber were addressing the invisibility of girls in youth subcultural studies that heavily centred on male participants. They argued that girls were not necessarily marginal to presumed male-led subcultures but were rather "located structurally in an altogether different position" (McRobbie & Garber, 1978/1991, p. 3). Perceiving public subcultural spaces as overrepresented in cultural studies and skewed towards male subjects, McRobbie and Garber relocate subcultural practices to the private realm of girls' bedrooms. At the same time, they are careful not to imply that girls were absent from public spheres, and so presented the bedroom as an alternative, rather than exclusive, location for girls' culture. Later, in 2002, Catherine Driscoll would define girls' culture as discursively attached to the bedroom because of the role that domestic space has played in historically structuring girls' lives:

> Girl culture articulates cultural activities and situations found specific to girls and, more-over, framing a culturally specific model of consumption situated by reference to a domestic girl space. While boys as much as girls

> might participate in bedroom culture, girls' association with this space belongs to preexisting discourses on girls' lives. (p. 260)

Driscoll goes on to acknowledge that even though girls' bedrooms are situated among notions of domesticity, confinement, and the nuclear family, bedroom culture is not bound to conform to traditional practices of femininity. Bedroom culture can in fact reflect "a form of isolation or resistance to family authority" (Driscoll, 2002, p. 261). It is within their bedrooms, McRobbie and Garber (1978/1991) contend, that girls engage with resistant cultural materials, where they listen to music, read magazines, and experiment with their style through clothing and makeup. Mary Celeste Kearney (2006) later points out, however, that girls' subcultural participation becomes limited to consumption-based activities when discussed in this way, thus eclipsing the possibility for cultural production. McRobbie and Garber's essay is nonetheless significant in shifting attention to girls' bedrooms as sites of cultural activity. Over the following decades, studies turning towards girls' more active participation in subcultural production, including Kearney (2006), repeatedly cite and build upon McRobbie and Garber's foundational contribution.

A number of these studies were undertaken in response to the riot grrrl movement in the 1990s when girls became involved in countercultural DIY zinemaking (Harris, 2003; Kearney, 2006; Leonard, 1997; Piepmeier 2009).[3] Others note girls' participation in the production of fan fiction (Penley, 1992), while others more recently consider girls' bedrooms as key stages for streaming video games (Ruberg & Lark, 2021) and TikTok content (Kennedy, 2020). One of the most comprehensive of these studies is Kearney's *Girls Make Media* (2006). Kearney's book charts a history of girls' cultural production in North America, rewriting misogynistic assumptions that position girls and women as consumers and boys and men as producers. Kearney goes as far back as the domestic crafting activities of the Victorian era to the scrapbooking by fans of classic Hollywood cinema. By the late twentieth century these practices had expanded to photography, music, filmmaking, zinemaking, and web design.[4] Kearney points out that many of these practices entered

[3] Riot grrrl was a feminist movement popular in the 1990s that began when girls and women spoke out against gender exclusion in punk countercultural spaces.

[4] Amateur photography, however, had already become an available practice by the late 1800s through Kodak's handheld cameras.

girls' bedrooms because of technological advancements that established affordable equipment and greater accessibility for amateurs, like handheld cameras and personal computers. This would happen much later for gamemaking tools, although I will elaborate on accessible game design programs in a following section. Access to equipment, coupled with leisure time to spare, however, tended to remain limited to white and middle- to upper-class girls (Kearney, 2006, p. 66).

As Kearney (2006) recounts, girls would harness their craft to reject hegemonic framings of girlhood; a predominant practice within the countercultural riot grrrl scene. Their zines declared alternative, resistant identities to traditional versions of femininity promoted in girls' lifestyle magazines. They further encouraged the establishment of several girl communities. Riot grrrl zines and their accompanying web pages helped connect girls to one another from within the spaces of their bedrooms. Riot grrrl, as an anti-establishment feminist movement, explicitly promoted "girl love" over "cat fights" (Piepmeier, 2009, p. 84). In examining riot grrrl zine communities, Marion Leonard (1997), found that zines offered an intimate mode of communication among girls, where the unknown reader was often positioned as a "confidante" to the author. Established in the bedroom and usually across a geographical divide, Kearney (2006) draws from Benedict Anderson in considering how these practices foster "imagined communities" (p. 64).

Riot grrrl and zinemaking has long been a popular site for analysing girls' cultural production, community building, and bedroom culture. At around the time of the new millennium, however, virtual girl communities formed around a number of avenues beyond riot grrrls' overtly politicised spaces. Anita Harris (2004) also looks towards virtual communities as spaces for girls to resist adult surveillance and regulation, where in addition to political activism, "[e]ven whimsical and personal uses of the internet can be meaningful" (p. 150). Virtual communities and web design in this era are the precise spaces reflected in the two games to be analysed in this chapter. Like they did for zines, girls often treated personalised web pages as confessional spaces too (Stern, 1999). Susannah R. Stern's (1999) study on girls' web pages found that some web pages functioned as an "asylum from a difficult and hostile world, as a place to say the things they would never—or could never—say in real life" (p. 26). Stern labels these types of web pages "sombre sites" and their cathartic functionality and secrecy from school peers is a theme directly addressed in *SLH* and *LMDN*.

Web pages can be considered a kind of precursor to social media, which has made personal profiles and online self-representation an everyday feature of contemporary culture. Teen girls' web pages in 1990s and early 2000s, however, were a unique space for creativity, self-expression, and community building. Jacqueline Reid-Walsh and Claudia Mitchell (2004) even go so far as to liken them to a "virtual 'Room of One's Own,'" in reference to Virginia Woolf's lecture about women's need for a space to write or carry out other intellectual and creative pursuits. They present a fascinating comparison:

> Many of the younger girls' pages appear to be virtual representations of their bedrooms, for they are decorated with floral and or pastel patterns called "wallpaper"; they contain representations of objects that resemble miniature stuffed animals or stickers from sticker albums; images of pop stars one might find on their walls; and so on. If there is a music file playing, it may be that of a favourite pop star, such as a girl might listen to in the privacy of her room. (Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2004, p. 180).

By sharing their domestic bedroom to the public, Reid-Walsh and Mitchell (2004, pp. 180–181) propose that girls' home pages have the capacity to complicate gendered presumptions that align boys to the public and girls to the home.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the wider domestic availability of the internet ignited a wave of studies revisiting McRobbie and Garber's (1978/1991) understanding of girls' bedroom culture (Davies, 2007; Kearney 2006; Leonard, 1997; Lincoln, 2006; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2004). I am interested in this era because this wave of studies provided fundamental groundwork in understanding girls' bedroom culture since McRobbie and Garber's essay first coined the term. It is also the era that the two games under analysis represent. Many of these studies, though, paid little attention to videogaming—with the exception of Davies' (2007) analysis of the computer game *Babyz*.

I do concede that playing videogames complies with McRobbie and Garber's limited linking of bedroom culture with consumption. In my later analysis on games with design components, though, I hope to unsettle the notion that self-expression and cultural production is antithetical to consumption. The notion of consumption as a mode of production is also addressed in Melanie Swalwell's (2021) relevant study on

the everyday uses of microcomputers in the late-1970s and 1980s. Like Swalwell's investigation into what she terms "homebrew" game development, I also consider hobbyist design practices when picturing videogame cultures from girls' bedrooms while drawing on the intersections between fan consumption and cultural production. A likely reason that game design in particular is absent in the studies mentioned above on girls' bedroom culture and production though, is the lack of design tools available at the time.

As mentioned earlier, one of the key factors that Kearney (2006) attributes to girls' bedrooms as sites of cultural production were the availability of inexpensive equipment with low-skill entry levels. Another major factor that incited so many studies of girls' bedroom cultures was the internet. For girls behind creative production like zines, the internet was the primary tool of distribution and community building. Amateur gamemaking tools though, would not become particularly fruitful until late in the following decade; a notable program for instance being Twine, a 2009 program based on hypertext markup language, or HTML, which requires little knowledge of coding.[5] In the 1990s though, gamemaking programs were otherwise mostly internalised within commercial studios and behind proprietary licensing barriers rather than being openly available to amateurs and hobbyists (Nicoll & Keogh, 2019).

I could just as well skip ahead in time to when tools like Twine opened up gamemaking to more hobbyists (see Harvey, 2014; kopas, 2015, Nicoll, 2019), but that would disregard the tools that *were* available from the 1990s, even if these required comparatively more complex coding skills. I also want to begin in this era as a means of writing videogame DIY into the foundational studies of bedroom culture that are so rooted in the 1990s and early 2000s—albeit through my revisionist perspective. As mentioned earlier, this is also the era represented in the two case studies. Their transformative power therefore begins with how they raise awareness of these invisible histories.

The reasons girls *were not* involved in game coding has been discussed in a number of studies which have found that much of this has to do with lack of parental encouragement, girls' having less domestic leisure time, and the privileging of boys'

[5] Prior to the internet, girls were nonetheless experimenting with game design on microcomputers, as Swalwell (2021) identifies.

bedrooms for the computer's location (Cunningham, 2018; Harvey, 2015; Jenson & de Castell, 2010; Johnson, 2018; McNamee, 1997; Wajcman, 1991). The gendered culture surrounding videogames and computer hacking in the 1990s (Kirkpatrick, 2015) also certainly contributed.[6] My aim here is to first draw attention to the girls who *were* involved in early bedroom gamemaking, even if in a peripheral capacity. Following this, I reimagine what DIY game spaces looked like through an overview of girls' early internet cultures.

Girls, Games, and Cultural Production

Anna Anthropy is an independent game developer who has written fairly extensively on DIY gamemaking. She has published an entire book on a gamemaking program called ZZT (or ZZT-OOP) (Anthropy, 2014) that includes a subsection titled, "Why ZZT Was the Perfect Game-Making Tool for a Nine-or-Ten-Year-Old Girl" (p. 45). In this section, Anthropy (2014) explains its appeal:

> The limitations of ZZT, for a kid who didn't know how to animate computer graphics or compose digital music, were profoundly liberating. 256 characters in sixteen colors were all I needed and all I would ever need. They are the building blocks of the universe. (p. 46)

ZZT was both a game and a scripting engine developed by Tim Sweeney in 1991. The first game by Sweeney was called *Town of ZZT* and the scripting engine was known as ZZT-OOP. ('ZZT' was chosen so that the game would be listed last on alphabetical shareware CDs and servers, while "OOP" is an acronym for 'Object Oriented Programming'). The program uses MS-DOS' text-based language and, as Anthropy (2014) describes above, consists of 256 characters that are available in sixteen colours. Its programming capabilities centred on moving objects around given spaces and making objects interact with one another. Anthropy (2014) recalls that the simplified engine "was the perfect theater to act out my confused childhood fantasies, my flailing attempts at self-identity and exploration" (p. 47). This sentence captures the

[6] These factors are not limited to the 1990s, as Swalwell (2021) found similar gendered barriers in her study on domestic microcomputer gamemaking in the previous two decades.

possibilities gamemaking afforded queer young girls who could harness tools like ZZT to experiment with identity and self-representation.

Anthropy (2014) also frequently references Alexis Janson when writing about ZZT. Janson is a developer who also made several games on ZZT while in her teens, many of which she made money from (Anthropy, 2014). Janson also developed a ZZT extension in 1994 called the STK (Super Tool Kit) that expanded the possibilities of the ZZT engine. Anthropy (2014, pp. 73–74) remembers mailing money to Janson's address and in turn receiving a floppy disc filled with Janson's games. This distribution method for hobbyist, non-professional games looks familiar to those described in Kearney's (2006) and others work on riot grrrl zines, where girls mailed one another payment in exchange for a copy of a zine mailed back. Anthropy has authored another publication titled, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Dreamers, Dropouts, Queers, Housewives, and People like You are Taking Back an Art Form* (2012). In this book, Anthropy plainly states, "I like the idea of games as zines: as transmissions of ideas and culture from person to person, as personal artefacts instead of impersonal creations by teams of forty-five artists and fifteen programmers"[7] (2012, p. 9, see also Keogh, 2015). Girls' zinemaking attracted the attention of several girlhood scholars; but hobbyist gamemaking and non-commercial game distribution also evidently offered a promising and liberating potential for girls in this era.

Outside of Anthropy's accounts, however, there is very little information available on other girls' participation in bedroom game-coding in this era other than accounts by or about individual creators or groups. This can be tied to the conditions named above in terms of limited gamemaking tools and the cultural discouragement of girls' participation. While Keogh (2019) has theorised "formal" and "informal" game design contexts, and scholars have examined semi-formal contexts for girls' gamemaking like afterschool programs (Cunningham, 2018; Denner et al., 2005), there is little research on girls' informal DIY practices. Even in an exhibition that *does* highlight girls' historical relationships with games—Girl Museum's online "Gamer Girl" exhibition (2015)—there is sadly a notable gap between 1996 and 2013 on their timeline.

[7] In reference to *Gears of War 2* (Epic Games, 2008).

Among the few accounts of girls making games in this era though, one compelling example comes from the founder of FEMICOM museum, Rachel Simone Weil, discussed in chapter one, who recalls modding the NES game *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985) when she was a teenager in 2002 and 2003 (Weil, 2013).[8] Weil's mod transformed *Super Mario Bros.* into a pastel pink and purple game called *Hello Kitty Land*. In 2017, *Hello Kitty Land* featured in an exhibition curated by media artist Angela Washko titled "Hacking/Modding/Remixing as Feminist Protest." The game was featured as a playable installation surrounded by feminine plush toys, a dollhouse and various *Barbie* merchandise. The walls were painted a warm pink, adorned with a festive pink and yellow garland and a *Sailor Moon* poster. Describing the installation, Washko (2017) writes,

> *Hello Kitty Land* is an exercise in alternative history and speculative futures that give primacy to nostalgia for girly-girl girlhood. It asks, "What if this game had shipped with the NES console instead of Super Mario Bros.? How would video game history be different today?" (para. 1)

The idea of reimagining game history by including "girlie-girl" artefacts is likewise demonstrated in the two games to be analysed, *SLH* and *LMDN*. They both project a "girlie" aesthetic upon their desktop interfaces, recoding technology from something cold, hard, and masculine (see Wajcman, 1991) to something conceivably warm, soft, and feminine, which I call an expression of techno-femininity.[9] [10] Accounts on gender and early games culture necessarily point out its pervasive masculine workings (Burrill, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 2015; Shaw, 2014), but Weil's FEMICOM Museum and games like *SLH* and *LMDN* are beginning to draw attention to the overlooked intersections of technology and femininity through play and games; a point I will

[8] Modding refers to the alteration of a preexisting game code by a player or hobbyist unaffiliated with the game company.

[9] Judy Wajcman's chapter "Technology as Masculine Culture" in her book *Feminism Confronts Technology* (1991) overviews the correlation between masculinity and technology in Britain and North America, from "hard" and industrial factory floors and military spaces to computational rationality as a masculine virtue.

[10] Inversely, the videogame industry has also notoriously associated its hardware with women's bodies through the sexualisation of its hardware, such as Sony's advertisement for the Playstation Vita in 2012 that featured a women's body with the slogan "Touch both sides for added enjoyment" (Trépanier-Jobin & Bonenfant, 2017).

return to later. For now, though, the fact that Anthropy's and Weil's accounts are among the few available on girls' bedroom game-coding reveals a need to think outside of how we traditionally situate gaming's DIY culture.

Tinkering with computers and hacking games appears to have largely belonged within the jurisdiction of boyhood (Burrill, 2008; Johnson, 2018; Kirkpatrick, 2015). But here is where McRobbie and Garber's (1978/1991) essay continues to inspire: gamemaking can be likened to how McRobbie and Garber theorised the public space of subcultures, that is, girls were present but comparatively peripheral due to the gendered inequalities of public space. Like McRobbie and Garber's relocating of subcultural space from the public to the bedroom to better account for girls, I've also discovered a need to locate an alternative site for DIY gaming culture that lies outside of gamemaking. Within these alternative avenues for girls' DIY gaming cultures, compelling instances of self-expression, creativity, and self-representation emerge.

Girls' participation in gaming culture through bedroom coding seems to rather take place through various web activities that have not been traditionally associated with games and DIY. A particularly prevalent instance comes through web design. In contrast to gamemaking, web design in the 1990s and early 2000s was hugely popular with teen girls (Gregson, 2005; Kearney, 2006; Mazzarella, 2005; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2004; Stern 1999). Kearney (2006) cites a 2003 study by the National School Boards Foundation that found that girls between nine and seventeen years old had in fact surpassed their male peers in internet use (p. 243). Meanwhile, 2007 Pew statistics on teens' internet use also found that teen girls were more likely to be content creators than teen boys (Lenhart et al., 2007, pp. 4–5).

While girls' web design certainly was acknowledged in studies of girls' cultural production in the 1990s and early 2000s, it wasn't associated with gaming culture. Areas of web design, however, were not isolated from videogaming and so girls' web design ought to be recontextualised in conjunction with gaming DIY culture. Gaming DIY culture begins to look very different from boys' rebellious hacking and tinkering when it is located within girls' internet culture. Girls' websites, though, are legitimate sites of DIY gaming practices as they often emerged as extensions of the videogames girls played. Studies endeavouring to make sense of girls' web design and self-taught HTML often mention videogames as driving the content featured on their websites. Poems and fan fiction related to Square's *Final Fantasy VIII* (1999), for instance, were

noted by Kelly Chandler-Olcott and Donna Mahar (2003) to be hosted on their girl participant's various web pages. Other games like *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000) and *Neopets* (Powell & Williams, 1999), have also been noted to drive girls' web page design (Carpenter, 2017; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2004).

Writing for *Variety*, Nicole Carpenter (2017) unpacks girls' early internet culture through the lens of *Neopets*, while even referencing the case study *LMDN* as an expression of this culture. *Neopets* was a web browser game released in 1999 where players took care of virtual pets. They could also set up shops, battle other pets, and explore the fictional realm of Neopia. Carpenter (2017) speaks to women who remember purchasing domains with their parents' credit cards to expand their *Neopets* accounts. Several girls developed personal sites for their *Neopets* guilds, or shops, or even sharing their knowledge of HTML to other girls in exchange for *Neopets* items. Carpenter notes that *Neopets* already promoted a DIY ethos through its creative components like setting up shops or writing for 'The Neopian Times' newspaper. In subsequently pursuing web design, "girls on 'Neopets' took what they needed from the site and used the skills acquired there to further develop a burgeoning digital girls' culture" (Carpenter, 2017, para. 26). One interviewee—now a software engineer—describes their involvement:

> I coded everything. And what came out of that was my first tutorial site where I was teaching people—other girls, mostly—to code. I had a 'staff member' when I was 14, also writing tutorials. That's what I was doing in my spare time. (as cited in Carpenter, 2017, para. 9)

Neopets attracted a high number of girl players (Carpenter, 2017), while girls have been understood to gravitate towards online spaces that were mostly populated by other girls (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003). Other community and management games that drew in girl players, like *Club Penguin* (New Horizon Interactive, 2005) and *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo, 2001–2020), also inspired the creation of blogs and websites that can be found through the Internet Archive's 'Wayback Machine.'[11] One *Club Penguin* blog that began in 2008 features vibrant pink and purple pages with short stories, blogs, cheats, and walkthroughs from and about the game. A slightly

[11] An initiative that aims to preserve timeworn websites.

earlier blog from 2005 on *Animal Crossing*—presumably *Animal Crossing: Wild World* (Nintendo, 2005) based on the blog entries and dates—takes a different approach, where the author writes from the perspective of a villager who blogs about their new life in the game world's village. Web pages like these supplement and extend girls' videogame play in ways that cultivate their creativity, self-expression, and identities within gaming culture, whether that be roleplaying a villager in *Animal Crossing* through a fictionalised blog, or coordinating an online community hub for *Neopets* or *Club Penguin*. These activities also reflect Henry Jenkins' (1992, 2006) pivotal work on participatory culture, which sheds light on the often-overlooked forms of cultural production carried out by fans.

The intersection of fandom with girls' gaming DIY practices is especially evident through "The Fanlistings Network." Fanlistings were web pages dedicated to films, television programs, and games, as well as specific actors and fictional characters in popular culture. The web pages might hold information about their subject, although they primarily functioned to present a list of fans who have successfully applied to join the subject's fanlisting. Fans joining need only supply their name and either their personal website or email address. Sometimes additional information like a favourite character will also be displayed next to their name when added to the list. The pages themselves are designed and managed by individual fans who must also apply through fanlistings with evidence of web design skills, usually by sharing their personal website.

While it is difficult to acquire formal statistics on the gender distribution of fanlistings, there are several videogame pages that list overwhelmingly more girls' names than boys, although I acknowledge the limitations of speculating gender in this way. Many also feature hyperfeminised colours and graphics and are thus another demonstration of techno-femininity. There are also fan pages for girls' games, which were otherwise excluded from mainstream gaming culture as discussed in chapter one of this thesis. A fanlisting dedicated to HerInteractive's 1999 game *Nancy Drew: Stay Tuned for Danger*, for example, was created in 2006 by a user identified as 'Webmistress Veronica' who manages so many fanlistings that a separate website had been set up to list their collection, which is still active at the time of writing. Another girl-led fanlisting is one on the *Final Fantasy* series (Square Enix, 1987–), which credits the girls who have managed the site over the years on its homepage.

All of the web pages described above represent an alternative space for bedroom DIY gaming culture carved out by girl web designers. For girls, web design is a promising avenue to develop "a greater sense of their own agency" (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003, p. 380) allowing them to take on active roles in videogame cultural production. The websites that I've described are all rooted in fan culture and are extensions of videogame play, but fan production is not the only avenue for girls' gaming DIY culture. Another area of online content creation worth raising is the phenomenon of dollmaking that was popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Dollmaking was a trend of avatar customisation using pixel figures first called "Little People" and then later dubbed "Dollz." By the early 2000s, most people designed their Dollz by visiting popular dollmaking websites, like "Dollz Mania" where they could click and drag preexisting assets onto a template figure and then download or import their avatars onto websites through a generated HTML code (see Delaney, 2018). Other users were more active in editing their own Dollz and used image software like Photoshop, Paintshop, or MS Paint to create their own designs over the base templates. These were often then shared among other members of the dollmaking, or "dolling," community.

The initial creation of Dollz is mostly attributed to a teenage girl named Melicia Greenwood, known in the community as shatteredInnocence or artgrrrl, who created them for a chat room she frequented in the 1990s called The Palace.[12] The Palace was a 2D avatar-based chatroom with multiple servers or "rooms" where users could meet as personalised avatars. Greenwood (2003a, 2003b) posted a detailed account of how Dollz came about, titled "originz," on her website. In the account, Greenwood (2003a, 2003b) shares the avatar experiments she performed with friends, prompted as she became "bored with the same ol' same ol' 'photo of a hunk or babe'" used by other visitors in the chatroom (2003a, para. 2). Avatars in The Palace were made up of nine 'props' or pieces, which were the foundation for Greenwood's Dollz. She would make the props in Photoshop and then transfer them into her "prop bag" in The Palace before piecing them back together again. As she recalls:

[12] Another source (Cyberia, 2012) attributes the origin of Dollz to a male Palace user 'Rainman' in 1997 who drew animated skater avatars. It is difficult to come by an official account that details which designs came first, although Greenwood's (2003a, 2003b) account claims to have created them in 1995. While Rainman's avatars are similar, they do not share the same distinct aesthetic qualities of Dollz as Melicia's earlier designs.

> [B]asically, i was getting really bored, even though i had only been on the Palace for a month or so. i had already made some of my own cartoons into avs [avatars], so i had started drawing cartoons to fit the 132x132 square. but one night, in December 1995, i drew a cartoon "Barbie" … but i made her goth, cuz i'm goth. i made her fit into three 44x44 props, tall 'n skinny, just like a Barbie doll. i made her fit 3 props so i'd have 6 left to put skirts, tops, stockings, etc. on her. well … everybody loved it!!! (Greenwood, 2003a, para. 5)

Dollz quickly grew immensely popular among The Palace's young users, especially girls and young women (as noted by Carpenter, 2018). Categories like 'sk8er', 'prep,' and of course 'goth' emerged, as girls edited their own designs over Greenwood's bases or innovated their own bodies and poses. According to Greenwood, girls began hosting dolling contests, sometimes called "pageants," within The Palace, where designers would be given a simple prompt, for instance a colour, and be given five minutes to submit a design to be judged. It is easy to liken these contests to flash game jams that take place today among independent game developers.

It may, however, be difficult to perceive Dollz as having anything to do with games culture. That they were made in Photoshop makes it all the more tempting to confine them to graphic design. But dressing up dolls has always been an act of *play*. *Barbie Fashion Designer* saw the potential of translating girls' play—dressing up dolls—to digital gaming. Its success radically altered what videogames could look like. A few years later in 2000, for instance, was the phenomenal success of *The Sims*, which was even originally to be titled "Doll House" (Donovan, 2010). Greenwood's website, meanwhile, also featured a Dollz trading card page with blank card templates for creators to design Dollz cards to trade. Greenwood describes it as a project inspired by collectable card games like *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and *Magic the Gathering*. As discussed in chapter one, however, dressing up games like Barbie were not perceived as an authentic or worthy expression of digital play, and neither was the practice of designing Dollz.

The dollmakers in The Palace did not go unchallenged by its older users, who grew impatient with the increasing number of Dollz populating the servers. On Greenwood's (2003b) blog, she recalls:

> [S]ome Palaces started asking people NOT to wear [Dollz]! they were assuming everyone wearing a doll was a kid going to make trouble. (there were "clans" that did make trouble, but not as many people as serious doll editors!) you'd log onto a Palace and the first room would have a sign, "no little people" or "no skaters" and the admins (they're called "wizards" and "gods") would prop-gag you. (para. 6)

An article retelling the phenomenon of Dollz in The Palace, also by Nicole Carpenter, (2018) explains that dollmaking contests were dismissed as "dress-up games" or "girls' games" (para. 14). Carpenter cites a correspondent who disclosed that the teens in The Palace "ruined" the chat room "for the rest of us" (para. 14). Another retrospective article considers the endurance of dollmaking as an act of "rebellion" against The Palaces' older users: "[T]he Baby Boomers weren't cool with their turf being overrun by teen/tween self-expression. The more the Baby Boomers complained, the more aggressively Gen Xers and Millennials championed Dollz" (Delaney, 2018, para. 13). These accounts all attest to the resilience teen girls display against communities that refuse to accept girl-led and feminine expressions of games culture. These are the same critical discourses that surrounded the girls' games movement and around casual games today. The authenticity and value of girls' play is disputed yet again, in this instance targeted at dollmaking.

Dollz' popularity, however, endured for years. They even transcended their digital home when Dollz entered major fashion and merchandise spaces, like North America's subcultural retail chain Hot Topic (Delaney, 2018). Today, "Y2K" fashion and digital aesthetics are recirculating, as perhaps forecast by contemporary games like *SLH* and *LMDN*, which reference "dolling" activities. More recently in 2021, photographer and director, Petra Collins, created a simple web-browser game *Brutal: The Game* to promote teenage actress and singer Olivia Rodrigo's single "Brutal." The game accompanies the Y2K-inspired video clip to "Brutal," also directed by Collins, and stars Rodrigo as a doll avatar as she traverses a pink and purple shopping centre, collecting bottles of soda and combating undead teen girls, also represented as dolls.

It is not my intention here to critically unpack the fashion stereotypes, beauty ideals, and body normativity that is characteristic to dollmaking, although it is worth sharing Rebekah Willett's (2007) reminder that "[g]irls can be conscious and critical

of the ways they are being positioned, yet also take pleasure in those positions" (pp. 115–116). The key aim of this section has been to revisit gaming's DIY bedroom culture in order to include the overlooked sites of girls' participation. Girls were certainly involved in cultural production adjacent to videogames, although it looked different and occurred in different spaces than the commonly considered hacking culture associated with boyhood.

LMDN and *SLH* both pay homage to girls' bedroom coding in this era and are thus transformative for bringing these histories to light. I've presented this history not only to contextualise the two games' settings, but to also add gaming culture to the wave of studies addressing girls' online cultural production in the 1990s and 2000s. Studies that already extensively address girls' web design can receive greater nuance when theorised through the lens of games culture. Most crucial, gaming's DIY history must be expanded beyond boyhood-aligned hobbyist gamemaking if we are to better account for girls' participation too. With this context in mind, there is much to now say about *SLH* and *LMDN*.

Exploring the World Wide Web in *Secret Little Haven* and *Lost Memories Dot Net*

Secret Little Haven and *Lost Memories Dot Net* are both simple, independent games developed in an engine called Unity. Though they were released in 2018 and 2017, respectively, they both present charming reflections of the early domestic internet through a teen girls' personal desktop. Both girl protagonists participate in online cultural production from their bedrooms. Alex of *SLH* writes fan fiction, and dresses up online dolls, while her friend Laguna teaches her coding tricks for the game's fictional 'SanctuaryOS' operating system. Similarly in *LMDN*, protagonist Nina and her online friend Kayla are both passionate about web design. Their websites host personalised blogs and "shrines"—celebratory dedicated web pages—for their favourite anime and videogame characters. The two games then evidently embody Jenkins' (1992) participatory cultures, recognising that fan practices lie at the heart of girls' DIY culture.

Players of *SLH* come to know fifteen-year-old Alex by exploring her desktop, chatting to friends, reading emails, and browsing through her favourite websites and

forums. The game takes place over the course of four days. It begins 12th May 1999 with the announcement of a "Pretty Guardians Love Force"—hereafter Pretty Guardians—film to be screened that weekend. The fictional film is based on Alex's favourite anime series. The forums and much of her instant messenger conversations centre on excitable speculation about the film. Players are able to read about the plot, characters and world of Pretty Guardians through the "PGFans" website bookmarked on Alex's computer. The show is undoubtedly inspired by the anime television series *Sailor Moon* (Sato & Igarashi, 1992–1997), originally titled *Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon* in Japan). On the "Guardians' Haven" fan art subforum, Laguna posts a short comic depicting the fans' popular speculation of a boy character from the show transforming into one of the female Pretty Guardians. The panel of illustrations shows the character defiantly removing his jacket and pants to reveal a Guardian top and skirt beneath. This illustration sets in motion a line of questioning for Alex—"I wish I could change like that"—who comes to understand her transgender identity over the course of the game.

Alex explores identity through her online activities, which includes writing fan fiction about Pretty Guardians, dressing up dolls in the "Doll Atelier" application, and learning to code. Alex also uses instant messenger to talk to her online friends about identity, gender, and Pretty Guardians. Through messenger, Alex confronts her male school friend's pressure to conform to toxic masculine behaviours, like going shooting on the weekend, while the coding skills learned from Laguna enable Alex to stand up to her emotionally abusive father by hacking his account.

SLH is ultimately a coming-of-age game about a girl who discovers community and self-expression through the internet. The utopic possibilities of the early internet are presented to players through an encouragement to explore the inviting and vibrant pink and purple SanctuaryOS interface. The design of the interface celebrates the often-overlooked intersections of technology and femininity, specifically in the way it draws inspiration from Apple's G3 series. In an interview with the videogame website *Game Developer* (formerly *Gamasutra*), developer Victoria Dominowski explains,

> [W]hen I was much younger, still closeted, still ignorant of myself, and still associating with friends who were deeply ensconced in toxic masculinity as a cover for my real feelings, my friend used to make fun of Macintoshes for their more feminine appearance [...] Years later, after I had moved on,

> confronted my feelings, and came out, I found an old bright pink iMac G3 in a thrift store running OS 9 [...] I used that computer to explore a lot of the feminine media that I was too afraid to indulge in when I was much younger. I decorated it from head to toe with cute, girly things, and expressed myself through the use of the computer. [...] This is why I chose to design SanctuaryOS after Mac OS 9—because to me, it represents a time of healing, empowering femininity, and acceptance. (as cited in Couture, 2018, paras. 8–10)

Apple's Clamshell iBook G3 was released soon after the iMac G3 and was derogatorily nicknamed "Barbie's Toilet Seat" (Dormehl, 2016) The "Barbie Secret Messages Computer Playset" (released in 2000) in fact included a set of model computers based on the iMac G3. The sewing machine developed in collaboration with Nintendo, mentioned in chapter one, was also reportedly designed with the iMac's aesthetic in mind (Steinkopf-Frank, 2020). The Clamshell meanwhile, even makes an appearance in *Legally Blonde* as protagonist Elle Woods' personal computer, where its bright girlie design stands out among her peers' sea of black laptops. Apple's G3 series therefore stands as a cultural articulation of techno-femininity. On the one hand, the series may hold connections to stereotypically gendered products, but on the other, it has also been adopted as a symbol of self-aware feminine pleasure and identity expression, as seen through Dominowski's words or through the figure of Elle Woods.

The OS 9-inspired interface in *SLH* also embeds various DIY components for players to engage with. Many of these components are related to girls' play cultures and therefore extend the interface's techno-feminine workings. One of the creative applications is called the "Doll Atelier," where players dress up and design the appearance of a template figure that can then be downloaded and shared with friends. The Doll Atelier seems to be a clear reference to the popular online dollmaking mentioned in the previous section. There is also a document application where players may optionally build upon Alex's fan fiction; an activity also noted to be driven by girls' cultures (Penley, 1992). The Pretty Guardians website includes a "Show Info" page with its premise and a summary for each character. Clicking the document application on Alex's desktop opens a file with two chapters of Alex's fan fiction for the series followed by an unwritten third chapter titled "Where Do We Go From Here?" Players therefore have the relevant information to build on Alex's story; or they may open a

new window, or delete the existing text, to begin fresh. This is entirely optional, but it is nonetheless encouraged through the "Show Info" page, its enticing unwritten third chapter, and through the other characters who support Alex, and the player, to continue writing.

By not guiding the player how to spend their time in a structured, linear way, *SLH* reflects the freedoms Dominowski recalls of the early internet: "I wanted them to feel like anything is possible in this new space [...] I wanted SanctuaryOS to be magical" (as cited in Couture, 2018, para. 14). In the same *Game Developer* interview (Couture, 2018), Dominowski emphasises the important role the internet can play for young trans people who may represent themselves online in ways that they feel their bodies offline might not, as research into social media and trans youth has also found (Buss et al., 2021).[13] Alex's desktop thus represents the titular "haven." In this sense, Turner's imagining of liminality as an anti-structural site for freedom, pleasure, and playfulness is recalled. In *SLH*, Alex's online activities empower her to explore her identity through community, fandom, creativity, and by holding a different kind of control over her self-representation.[14]

Functioning in a similar way to Dominowski's *SLH*, *Lost Memories Dot Net* places its emphasis on awkward middle-school romance and girls' web design communities, which, like *SLH*, are explored between instant messenger conversations. *LMDN*'s protagonist is fourteen-year-old Nina, named after the game's developer Nina Freeman. Nina is a middle school girl with her own web page, "lost-memories.net" where she blogs about school, friends, anime, videogames, and her tumultuous relationship with her parents. *LMDN* is a short game that takes place across three days spread across April 2004. Over the month, Nina confides to her online friend Kayla about her worries at school and at home. At home, her parents are divorced and fight frequently with one another. At school, her best friend Amy has asked Nina to set her up with their friend Jared, whom Nina also quietly holds romantic feelings for. Regardless of her feelings, Nina feels obliged to help Amy with Jared.

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[13] The interviewees in Buss et al.'s (2021) study also address the presence of negative, harmful, and invalidating individuals and groups online.

[14] Alex's "haven," however, is frequently intruded upon by her emotionally abusive father, drawing attention to the limitations of girls' bedrooms as private sanctuaries. Concerns of surveillance and privacy are also raised in *LMDN* during Nina and Kayla's conversations. See chapter three for further discussion of adult intrusion in girls' spaces in *Life Is Strange*.

Outside Kayla, Amy, and Jared, Nina occasionally chats to others on instant messenger too. One user named Derek, for instance, shares he discovered Nina's website through *Neopets* where, as he informs Nina, "some guild is using your graphics." Players learn then that Nina designs and shares her own graphics on a fictional website called "Daydream Graphics." As Nina and Derek bond over their love for *Neopets*, Nina encourages him to create his own blog. Their conversation jumping between web design and *Neopets* attests to how games like *Neopets* are tied to internet culture and girls' online DIY practices.

At the centre of *LMDN*, though, is Nina and Kayla's friendship. They share a special connection that is free from the judgemental constraints they feel from those they know in real life. At the end of the month, when Jared and Amy begin officially dating, Kayla comforts Nina by suggesting the two of them create an icon blog together. Icons, in this context, are images or animations that were typically set in 100x100 pixel square frames and used to decorate personal web pages. Nina and Kayla's final conversation concludes with their plans to design icons based on their favourite videogames and anime for their planned new blog.

Like *SLH*'s Alex, Nina is drawn to magical girl anime like *Sailor Moon*—one of her blog posts describes drawing art from the show. Nina is also interested in videogames like *Final Fantasy* and games that are fictional to *LMDN* like "Wing Saga" and "Blade Ladder." Players can visit fanlistings websites that Nina has joined for the characters from the fictional videogames. She had hoped to create her own original fanlisting for a "Wing Saga" character although another fan had successfully applied to manage the page before her. Nina nonetheless takes part in creating her own online shrines for her favourite characters.

While players learn that Nina juggles multiple websites, it is her personal blog, lost-memories.net, that they are granted direct creative freedom over. While the textual entries themselves are fixed, players are encouraged to spend time constructing the blog and experimenting with its design. Players can download images and icons from the various fanlistings websites to embed on the blog, as well as the images that Kayla shares on instant messenger. Players can also choose different heading fonts and sizes, colour schemes, and wallpaper. The blog nostalgically resurrects the look and feel of website hosting services at the time of its 2004 setting like LiveJournal, GeoCities, and Angelfire. It also offers a nod to the social media platform MySpace,

which allowed significant creative control over the appearance of users' web page-inspired profiles.

Nostalgic techno-femininity is also conjured through *LMDN*'s interface. Like *SLH*, it embraces a girlie aesthetic, bathed in soft feminine shades of peach and yellow, while Nina's repository of icons—from florals and selfies, to anime and videogame characters—reflects how girl and geek cultures converged in these spaces. The feminine designs further complement the two games' ambient soundtracks, inscribing a dreamlike quality to their interfaces. In an interview with games scholar Bo Ruberg (2020), Freeman shares,

> I want everything I make to be super feminine or cutesy […] I played Barbie games a lot growing up. They're a really important part of games history that we don't talk about. Video games shouldn't need to be hyperrealistic or dark to be taken seriously. (p. 178)

Freeman's comment supports the notion that girls and young adult women are knowing and conscious of how they engage with techno-femininity. In this context, hyperfeminine technologies are so much more than misunderstood corporate endorsements of false gender truisms. These are also complex sites of pleasure that speak to girls' lived experiences. Games like *SLH* and *LMDN* invite us to reconsider these technologies as much more intricate than existing historical accounts have allowed. The introduction of girlhood studies to videogames and games histories helps to make sense of what these two case studies are addressing.

The ambivalent workings of femininity, for example, is heavily underscored in the two texts. At the time of the games' settings—the late 1990s and early 2000s—hyperfeminine characters were trendy in mainstream girls' media as seen in popular screen texts like *Sailor Moon*, which is referenced in both games. Figures like *Sailor Moon*'s protagonist Usagi (or Serena in the English version) were at the time critiqued for conforming to normative and non-threatening presentations of femininity (see Hains, 2004). More recently though, and coinciding with the two games' recent development, an number of popular press articles and blogs have arisen by women proudly declaring their coming-to-terms with overt "girliness." Articles with titles like 'Why I'm Finally Okay With Embracing Pink' (Lisa, 2016) specifically celebrate a resurgence of the highly-gendered colour. Such articles proclaim the need to divorce

pink from its associations with weakness, anti-feminism, and binary gender stereotypes. Within the LGBTQ+ community, the colour has also been harnessed as a defiant expression of *non-conforming* gender (Hitchman, 2019; Kearney, 2015). Pink's aesthetic revival became popular from around 2015 and has been linked to internet cultures among young adults; even leading to the reclamation being dubbed "millennial pink" or "Tumblr pink" (Bideaux, 2019, p. 4), and thus directly linking it to notions of techno-femininity.

Kearney (2015) also considers the girlie aesthetic of what she calls "sparklefication" and its capacity to dissolve effeminophobia. Girl and queer communities that embrace "sparklefication," Kearney (2015) writes, are "championing femininity for the various pleasures it elicits and the subversive potential it offers within patriarchal heteronormative societies" (p. 270). Kearney (2010) acknowledges elsewhere, however, that "[p]ink's signifying power has been so cemented over the past half century that it is very difficult to associate it with anything other than females and femininity" (p. 29), making it difficult to disentangle the colour from its use in upholding rigid gender stereotypes. At the same time, there is nonetheless a subversive potential at play when integrating the colour pink onto products and technologies that are otherwise traditionally bound to masculinity.[15]

The alluring nostalgia of games like *SLH* and *LMDN* prompts a knowing reflection of how girls and queer communities growing up in the 1990s and 2000s might have experienced and processed girlie products and media. These games especially spotlight the intersections of femininity and technology, as expressed by the explanations of the game developers Dominowski (as cited in Couture, 2018, paras. 8–10) and Freeman (as cited in Ruberg, 2020, p. 178). *SLH* and *LMDN* represent a dialogue between the techno-feminised spaces of their early internet settings and the more recent resurgence of techno-femininity since the late 2010s. Outside of videogame texts, nostalgic reflections on girlie gaming culture is at the centre of Weil's FEMICOM Museum initiative, which even warns "No 'pink sucks!' vibes" on its homepage. Reflecting on techno-feminine histories and celebrating them today stands as another productive form of nostalgia—a concept raised in chapter three. The past is

[15] Kearney (2010) takes pink guitars and rock culture as an example.

not recreated, but its representation invites learning and valuation of girls' invisible histories.

Through the feminine interfaces of *SLH* and *LMDN*, players become intimately enmeshed in the lives of their teen girl protagonists. Similarly to *SLH*, as discussed above, players get to know Nina through her messenger chats, posts, and websites frequented while also being able to partake in her DIY activities. The characters Alex and Nina are both cultural producers, exposing girl players to the cultural producer as a possible subjectivity for girls. There are also elements of cultural production and creative expression in the other games discussed throughout the thesis: Max in *Life Is Strange* journals and takes photographs, Ellie in *The Last of Us Part II* also journals, sketches, writes poetry, and plays guitar, Rockett Movado from Purple Moon's *Rockett* series also journals, sketches, and takes photographs. While I briefly touched on the empowering potential of photography and self-representation in *Life Is Strange*, I have reserved a deeper discussion of girls' DIY practices here because *SLH* and *LMDN* help to relocate specifically gaming and coding culture to girls' spaces. These two games also more actively welcome the player's own creative expression through their DIY play systems like web design, writing fan fiction, and dollmaking.

Importantly to their context, both games counter presumptions that girls were not interested in computers at the beginning of the new millennium. As I explored in chapter one, these were incorrect presumptions made by the video game industry in the 1990s. The two games rather demonstrate that girls' bedroom culture was a legitimate site of gaming DIY culture in the era. *LMDN* references *Neopets* among numerous other games that drive Nina and Kayla's web design, be it creating graphics or icons, personal blogs, shrines, or fanlistings pages. *SLH*, meanwhile, introduces the player to the SanctuaryOS' terminal commands that are utilised as an empowering tool during the hacking sequence against Alex's father. *SLH* also makes reference to virtual pet games like Tamagotchi, with its own Tamagotchi-inspired application on Alex's desktop called "Egg Friend." Moreover, the popularity of online dollmaking is also explored through *SLH*'s "Doll Atelier" program that allows players to design and share their doll creations. The game's characters even design and share their own clothes packs among one another to be added to the application. Below Laguna's comic illustration on the fan forum, she adds: "I was still really inspired and stuff after making this so I took the outfit design and hacked it into a Doll Atelier clothes pack!"

sharing a link to download the clothes. After downloading the pack, the "Doll Atelier" program will then include sailor school uniform outfits inspired by the Pretty Guardians' costumes.

Both games therefore present girls' early internet culture as intertwined with gaming culture. Alex and Nina, operating from their bedrooms, participate in gaming DIY culture within online spaces that were mostly populated by girls. The two games fondly represent alternative spaces where girls experimented with games-adjacent cultural production, presenting an image of bedroom coding and games culture that was more relevant to girls' experiences. The two games situate these spaces within stories of girls' identity experimentation highlights the liminal affordances that these spaces granted. The possibilities for creative expression and self-representation furthermore become shared with the player through the games' DIY elements, where they can experiment with creative expression. Finally, the early internet's role in cultivating girls' DIY gaming culture is cemented through the videogame format of the case studies themselves that resurrect the memories and experiences of their girl and women developers.

Making Girlhood Games

In the introduction of this chapter, I listed three ways that Girlhood Games can cultivate self-representation: 1) The representation of girl characters as cultural producers, 2) the encouragement of players' creative expression through DIY play elements, and 3) the production of Girlhood Games themselves by girl developers. This final point has been made much more possible through the increasing accessibility of gamemaking tools. These tools have transformed the landscape of bedroom gamemaking that was evidently limited in the 1990s and 2000s as explained earlier in this chapter. Now, programs like Twine, Scratch, Unity, Unreal Engine, and GameMaker have made gamemaking far more accessible for young amateurs and hobbyists, thus broadening the possible avenues for girls to participate in DIY gaming culture. This is significant because, as Cunningham (2018) writes, "game design can offer girls a space to explore identity" (p. 115). If home computer hobbyist culture tended to be geared towards boys and men (Kirkpatrick, 2015), then girls' online cultural spaces around the same time, like fanlistings or dollmaking, functioned as

hobbyist spaces that were more welcoming for girls. Today, gamemaking programs like Unity and Twine are open to anyone interested in making games and so accessible tools begin to unsettle gender-segregated spaces for DIY gaming cultures. However, gendered spaces nonetheless remain, such as *Episode*'s Writer Portal, as discussed in chapter one, that are plainly designed with girls in mind.

Scratch, on the other hand, is a more educational program aimed for young hobbyists between the ages of eight and sixteen. It is free and fairly simple to use, and games are easily shared through the program's internal server. Scratch also hosts discussion boards, user-run competitions, and hubs for themed content called "studios" curated by Scratch users to help promote one another's projects. This type of format, according to Kafai and Burke (2016), welcomes "openness rather than gamer exclusivity" by "promoting the exchange of ideas" (p. 56). The types of games created on Scratch range from content that has historically been separated by gender, like dress up games to wrestling games, to more general themes like school and COVID-19, while others are dedicated to figures or texts like Barbie or *God of War*, yet they all coexist within the same online space.[16]

Games are also integrating coding education for young players, such as *Episode's* Writers Portal. However, other games are less gendered, like *Codemancer* (Important Little Games, 2019), which is for six to twelve-year-olds. *Codemancer* is an educational Girlhood Game about a young heroine on a fantasy quest to rescue her father through the magic of code. On its Steam page, the game proclaims that it "breaks down barriers that may have discouraged some kids from embracing technology." Its page also features photographs of children playing the game with adults, including a child in a purple princess costume.

Games like *Episode* and *Codemancer* introduce players to coding, while programs like Scratch or Unity and distribution platforms like itch.io make it easier to create and share small and personal "zine" games outside of the commercial games industry (Anthropy, 2012; Keogh, 2015). "Zine" games have been celebrated for disrupting the game industry's traditionally patriarchal game content and culture, as those that do not fit the dominant gamer identity are able to express themselves

[16] Although there are still studios labelling their collections as "*for*" boys or "*for* girls."

without the financial and hegemonic cultural constraints of formal videogame development (Anthropy, 2012; Keogh, 2015, Ruberg, 2020).[17]

Writing in 2006, Alexander Galloway imagines artist modding as a possible "countergaming" movement through its disruption of mainstream formal game conventions (drawing comparisons to cinema's French New Wave). For Galloway (2006), the countergaming movement subverted commercial videogame imperatives like seamlessness, pleasure, and fictional storytelling, inciting him to classify amateur hobbyist mods as a videogame "avant-garde" (p. 109). The countergaming movement, he writes, should aspire to "redefining play itself and thereby realizing its true potential as a political and cultural avant-garde" (2006, p. 114). In their book *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games* (2020), Ruberg takes on Galloway's provocation through interviews with indie game developers (including *LMDN*'s Nina Freeman). Ruberg (2020) writes that the developers' games prompt players to

> reconsider what the relationship between sexuality, gender, identity, and games can be, to look past long-established standards of gameplay and entrenched norms of discrimination, and instead to imagine video games as spaces for (in the words of queer theorist Jack Halberstam) "living life otherwise." (p. 10)

In this sense, avant-garde games disrupt gaming culture through their representation of marginalised voices. But it is also tied to formal aesthetic disruptions to videogames too, like "scrambling graphics, rejecting win states" (Ruberg, 2020, p. 17). The software itself is hence reimagined to be "at once 'political,' 'cultural,' and deeply queer" (Ruberg, 2020, p. 17); a notion clearly communicated through the queer and girlie interfaces of *SLH* and *LMDN*.

SLH and *LMDN*, both developed in Unity, effectively unsettle dominant, patriarchal narratives of technology and gaming. They represent the antithesis of the dark, boyhood den or basement stereotype so pervasively associated with videogame culture (Paaßen et al., 2017; Shaw, 2012). Meanwhile, the characters' social and identity trials assign value to girlhood experiences while legitimising girls' cultural

[17] See also Cunningham (2018) who similarly applies the term 'Riot Grrl Games.'

participation, which is often sidelined as frivolous or low-culture (Bode, 2010; Hollows, 2003; Nash & Lahti, 1999). The formats of *SLH* and *LMDN* moreover play with avant-garde (un)conventions, as they resist high scores and win states, high graphic fidelity, a long run time, and complex systems, while limiting the player's control of the narrative. *SLH* takes this further when it plays with its own borders, disrupting the immersion of the simulated desktop: a file containing John's password, when hacking his computer, does not show up on Alex's desktop, the player must minimise *SLH* to locate the file on their own desktop. *LMDN*, meanwhile, is free to play through the distribution platform itch.io, demonstrating its detachment from commercial motivation. The games, like many other queer avant-garde games discussed by Ruberg, are not necessarily intended for mainstream consumption. Dominowski especially emphasises that *SLH* was made with trans girls in mind who may value its identity validation (Couture, 2018), and so the game is intended to be a safe space for trans players rather than an educational experience for a presumed cisgendered audience (see Ruberg, 2020).

The Unity engine, like Scratch described above, has made gamemaking more accessible for developers with marginalised identities, who face greater institutional and cultural barriers in entering the commercial games industry (Anthropy, 2012, deWinter & Kocurek, 2013; O'Brien, 2017). Benjamin Nicoll and Brendan Keogh (2019) have produced a book-length study positioning Unity as a notable technology in driving accessible game design in the last decade. They list Unity's accessible interface, low cost, and flexible licensing as among the factors that have helped establish a "fertile ground" (Nicoll & Keogh, 2019, p. 3) for greater diversity in game styles and greater diversity in the perspectives behind them.[18]

SLH and *LMDN* are representative of the different developer perspectives and game styles that have emerged through open market tools like Unity. Through games like *SLH* and *LMDN*, gamemaking becomes an avenue of self-expression for independent developers. As self-expressive objects tied to their developer's nostalgia, desires, and interests, they are thus distinct from other areas of gaming in which girl perspectives are receiving greater value but that are more tied to commercial

[18] Nicoll and Keogh also note that Unity's proudly proclaimed "democratisation" of game design is received with "contradictory feelings" by their developer respondents who share concerns about increased competition, the company's potential monopoly over the industry, and the risk of game design practices becoming standardised and regulated (2019, p. 110).

motivations. These include the girls' game movement, the casual games movement led by Nintendo, and the expansion of teen girl media licensing IPs as discussed in chapter one. Girlhood Games by girls and women hold a different transformative potential that goes beyond commercial interests of Girlhood Games. Even before we consider the DIY play mechanics present in *SLH* and *LMDN*, for instance, the two games already make the cultural producer a visible subjectivity for girls through the nature of their independent development. At the same time though, the girls' games movement, even having been produced within commercial contexts, did nonetheless reflect an early articulation of these possibilities as evident in games like Theresa Duncan's *Chop Suey*. In place of focus group testing, *Chop Suey* drew on the women and girls in Duncan's life, her working-class background, and personal memories growing up (Glos & Golden, 1998c).

Beyond the textual affordances of Girlhood Games, as much of this thesis has been dedicated to, gamemaking too holds complex and transformative possibilities for girls. When looking at girls' afterschool game design programs, Cunningham (2018) found that "game design can be a site for girls to resist and transform traditional stereotypes" (p. 116) and can "offer girls a space to explore identity" (p. 115). Cunningham's observations build on those found by Denner, Bean, and Werner (2005) who observed a workshop in which middle school girls were instructed to create games using Flash. As mentioned in chapter four, the most prominent theme in the girls' games was managing fear—of getting in trouble; of violence; of negative repercussions for relationships—while two thirds of their games also included options to resist authority (Denner et al., 2005). These recurring themes led Denner et al. (2005) to propose that gamemaking be considered a vehicle for girls to experiment with identity and resistance.

Denner et al. and Cunningham discuss afterschool design contexts rather than bedroom DIY coding, but the resistant and self-representational potential remains applicable when considering informal gamemaking (including coding and design spaces like web design or dollmaking). *SLH* and *LMDN* both pay direct homage to girls' early online DIY cultures while inviting players to practise cultural production inside of their fictional desktops. The games themselves, meanwhile, demonstrate that video games do not necessarily have to be deeply personal in order to be objects of self-representation and self-expression. It must also be emphasised that Freeman and

Dominowski did not work alone on their projects but collaborated with other artists as well. In several interviews, Freeman even openly rejects the idea of her games as autobiographical or as a personal diary (Marquez, 2018; Ruberg, 2020). She nevertheless draws on personal experiences though, explaining that she is inspired by the ordinary and personal moments expressed in 1970s and 1980s American poetry (Marquez, 2018; Ruberg, 2020). Dominowski, meanwhile, shares that the goal of *SLH* was "to make the game that said what I needed to hear when I was younger" (Couture, 2018, para. 39).

Just like designing dollz or creating a website, games like *SLH* and *LMDN*, made possible through tools like Unity, are all a part of girls' digital, playful expression, where girls tell stories, represent their interests, or even present experimental versions of themselves, all while participating in DIY cultural production.

Conclusion

Girls' bedroom cultural production is still converging with gaming culture today in ways outside of gamemaking. Even though gamemaking is far more accessible today, other avenues—perhaps streaming being the most visible—are continuing to broaden the scope of videogame DIY and cultural production. Streaming is a curious practice to raise in this chapter's conclusion because the bedroom itself is frequently performatively displayed to convey intimacy between a streamer and their followers—and this strategy is strikingly more featured in streams by women than men (Ruberg & Lark, 2021).[19]

Pokimane is one famous girl streamer who posts an annual "room tour" for her followers. In a recent room tour (Pokimane, 2021), followers are introduced to her hyperfeminine pink and purple gaming accessories with designs inspired by magic girl anime, she draws attention to the makeup she keeps close to her monitor, she wears a floral dress while holding a plush toy as she speaks, there are fluorescent purple lights, around her room; and the editing of the video itself embeds feminine filters like heart-shaped borders. All of these girlie features are thus another contemporary expression

[19] Ruberg and Lark (2021) suggest that male streamers are less willing to feature signifiers of the bedroom—namely their beds—as a means of distancing their streaming labour from domesticity. They also suggest male streamers prefer not to infer parallels with the feminised practice of webcam modelling and other online sex work.

of femininity, technology, and gaming converging, although this time occurring through Pokimane's incredibly visible and high-profile streams. Pokimane's hypervisible platform lies in contrast to the somewhat peripheral spaces of girls' early internet culture as well as more niche sectors of the independent industry within which *SLH* and *LMDN* both belong. It is not my intention to unpack the complexities of Twitch streaming, gender, and domesticity—for this, see instead Ruberg and Lark (2021)—although streaming is one such contemporary site that draws together the themes of girls' bedrooms, cultural production, videogaming, and techno-femininity.

Cultural production, generally speaking, allows girls to share their voice. Girls' voices are something that Mary Pipher (1994) claims to be lost during adolescence, as discussed in chapter three. Michele Polak (2006), however, points out after engaging with Pipher that, "cyberspace allows girls to enter in search of identity, in search of a voice" and can "offer a step toward empowerment" (p. 178). To be too celebratory, however, would be to crucially overlook the harassment girls experience online in gaming culture contexts, and this has indeed been the case for girl streamers (Ruberg et al., 2019) as well as for marginalised independent developers (Keogh, 2013).

While several scholars in game studies have—and continue to—record gendered gatekeeping and harassment in games, my intention here has been to identify different spaces of games culture, specifically DIY games culture through which girls and other marginalised players have historically practiced self-expression and self-representation. Before accessible game design tools were made widely available, girls participated in DIY games culture in spaces that are not usually associated with the medium. Spaces like web page design were prominent and were constructed adjacent to the games girls played, like *Neopets* hubs and fanlistings, or through dollmaking and coordinated doll activities, like design contests and trading cards. Now, independent games development, whether commercial or hobbyist, is much more accessible, and through distribution platforms like itch.io or the Scratch server for younger hobbyists, girls' gaming cultural production is becoming less segmented by gender.

Secret Little Haven and *Lost Memories Dot Net* unsettle what hegemonic videogames and games culture looks like. The games pay homage to girls' early internet culture and through their protagonists, they centre the girl as cultural producer, all while imagining technological practices through a feminine lens.

Meanwhile, their independent development contexts exemplify the possibilities of DIY gaming today and the personal, girlhood perspectives that have emerged. Crucially, the games' creative components—like writing fan fiction or designing a web page—invite the girl player to take on the subjectivity of a cultural producer. The games help to construct a history that relocates coding culture from boys' basements to girls' bedrooms.

Conclusion:

Virtual Voyagers

The future of girlhood in game studies is looking bright. Since beginning research for this project, I have connected with new and emerging scholars interested in researching girlhood and videogames (Rafaqat, 2021; Reay, 2020b). I am also witnessing established games academics directing their attention towards girls and games (Vossen, 2019). Our understanding of girls and games will develop even more broadly through these added perspectives. In the time working on this thesis, I have also observed Girlhood Games themselves continue to grow and evolve. The future for Girlhood Games is thus also remarkably promising.

I coined the term Girlhood Games to describe an increase in coming-of-age games about girls that were mostly visible and generally well received. Most of the contemporary games I noted came from North America, which is reflected in my choice to contain most of my case studies to that region. Since undertaking this research, though, Girlhood Games have fortunately continued to spread rather immensely. In Australia alone, there are several recent and upcoming Girlhood Game releases, from Phoebe Watson's small visual novel *Everyday* (2021) to the upcoming game *Surf Club* by Olivia Haines, both of which proudly deploy a girlie visual palette of pink and other pastels. There is also Witch Beam's *Unpacking* (2021), where unpacking a young woman's belongings works to gently narrate her life over twenty-one years. Another unreleased game, *Wayward Strand* by Ghost Pattern, centres on an intrepid teenage journalist as she explores an airship hospital set in 1970s Australia. On this local scale alone then, girlhood stories are clearly continuing to be valued and normalised across various types of videogames—well beyond the borders of North America. The games represent the vast opportunities available to explore different perspectives and to tell stories that have remained relatively untold in videogames.

In 2021, the developer of *Surf Club*, Olivia Haines, shared with me how the coming-of-age genre resonates with her: "It was nice seeing people that were my age struggling with similar things, and these stories were always about growth. [The genre

is] never really judgemental" (as cited in Harkin, 2021, p. 112). Haines is referencing coming-of-age films, though she is embedding this sentiment in her own Girlhood Game, *Surf Club*, about a young woman who returns to her seaside town to reignite a relationship from her teens. For independent developers like Haines, gamemaking is a craft to reflect one's interests and personality, which Haines (2021) defiantly proclaims in her viral TikTok video: "The feminine urge to only make video games as a form of self expression and make no effort to appeal to gamers." Her words on the coming-of-age genre also reflect a common thread throughout this thesis—that Girlhood Games hold a possible kind of transformative power for girl players, who indeed may be drawn to roleplay characters with relatable experiences, free from judgement.

My game analyses have provided several possible frameworks to read Girlhood Games as transformative spaces. I have shown how Girlhood Games are liminal spaces with subversive potential by engaging with Victor Turner's framing of transition as "anti-structural." Girl players step into unregulated worlds that rarely resemble structured society, where they may safely practice various modes of resistance. Liminal freedoms were found to underscore each of the selected games for analysis, informed by the integration of girlhood studies to videogames. Different meanings and cultural insights emerge when the two fields come into contact. The textual analyses, however, by no means represent the extent of what Girlhood Games might offer, but rather demonstrate a set of tools for identifying and interpreting their transformative possibilities.

The heroines discussed resist various patriarchal obstacles, from an assigned role in adult society (*Oxenfree*), gendered violence (*Life Is Strange*), conservative ideologies of moral femininity (*The Last of Us* series), and misogynistic assumptions of girls' technological competency and role as cultural producers (*Secret Little Haven* and *Lost Memories Dot Net*). Often obstacles were related to the confronting knowledge acquired at adolescence, like the realities of surviving predatory men in *Life Is Strange* and *The Last of Us* (Part I). Additionally, none of the heroines featured in any of the case studies are designed to adhere to a male gaze. On the surface then, they stand as empowering symbols, yet their presence in games transfers their resistance into the hands of the player. From free movement to transgressive violence, from problem-solving to creative design, it is always the player who acts: a thumb stick is

moved to navigate the woods, a button is pressed to take a photograph, another is held to aim a bow and arrow, a mouse is scrolled to select a web page icon, a keyboard is used to write a line in a story, a game is reloaded if failure occurs and the player can always try again. Gaming's interactive functions thus create opportunities for girl players to actively take on agentic subjectivities.

When looking at young women's traditional *Bildungsroman* arcs, defiant resistance appears to be a liminal freedom that dissolves at the close of adolescence. Yet across each of the analyses, an underlying theme of non-normative temporality materialises, working to challenge the fleeting nature of liminality. Explorations of temporality are expected in coming-of-age or *Bildungsroman* texts, as the genre is definitively interested in transition. Temporality, however, is deployed in interesting and subversive ways in the games under analysis, producing a critique of normative developmental trajectories. In *Oxenfree*, a cyclical loop permits Alex to retain her liminal freedoms and evade an oppressive gender role in adult society, while the game's several timeslips further denounce linear momentum. Temporality is also central to *Life Is Strange*, where Max's rewind powers are deeply tied to nostalgic longing. Max harnesses her powers to rewrite her discontented present, and so her nostalgia becomes a resistant force that likewise rejects a linear mode of development. *The Last of Us* series also charts Ellie's development, though like Alex and Max, she is not driven to secure a normative postliminal future in either of the main instalments.

Girlhood Games therefore stand as more than temporary spaces to engage in liminal freedoms, as their refusal to endorse normative postliminal conclusions works to extend their anti-structural values. In this way, Girlhood Games encourage players to embrace post-structural, flexible, and fluid selves. When Sherry Turkle (1995) suggested that "living in flux may no longer be temporary" (p. 268), she was suggesting that virtual worlds challenge Turner's framing of liminality as only fleeting. So long as technological access is sustained, Girlhood Games are likewise spaces that can be entered and exited at will, regardless of whether a girl player perceives herself to have "grown up."

A far less optimistic theme that continually emerged throughout my research was the question of credibility. In chapter one I spoke of how girls' games in the 1990s were culturally delegitimised as games, and also of the derision targeted towards the

casual games of the mid-2000s, which likewise addressed girl players.[1] Issues of credibility also arose around girls' game cultures, evident through their lack of historical attention. Girls' games, consoles, and other gendered hardware and accessories have only recently really received treatment as interesting cultural objects through initiatives like Rachel Simone Weil's FEMICOM Museum. Even my own endeavour to learn more about Nintendo's *Girl Gamer* magazine, discussed in chapter one, proved difficult when several articles on the magazine only mocked its feminine stereotypes while providing little nuanced information of its contents.

Prominent and celebrated Girlhood Games have also received cultural stigmatisation. I have continually argued that Girlhood Games have become normalised, yet perhaps a more accurate phrasing ought to be "*becoming* normalised." The reception of Girlhood Games, while significantly improved, remains conditional. *Gone Home* is an early example of a game about girlhood that received many critical accolades. It is a "walking simulator" game; a term that is now an acceptable descriptor but was once deployed to deride story-based games without conventional action mechanics. While small independent games like Nina Freeman's *Lost Memories Dot Net* tend not to bother self-proclaimed "mainstream" and "hardcore" gamers, *Gone Home*, which Freeman also worked on as part of a small team, entered the spotlight with favourable reviews and several game-of-the-year nominations from popular mainstream outlets. *Gone Home* was released in 2013 and so it perhaps led the way for girlhood stories to become more visible over the remainder of the decade, although its praise was nonetheless met with severe pushback and ongoing claims that it was not, in fact, a "real" game (see Consalvo & Paul, 2019; Vist, 2015). Its 2013 release, perhaps not incidentally, also marked the year before GamerGate.

Later, there would be games like *Horizon Zero Dawn*, released in 2017, which explores girlhood within a rather conventional action RPG format. Because of this, it does not radically expand what videogames may be or the skill required to play them. *Horizon Zero Dawn* also received several game-of-the-year nominations although its praise and attention was not particularly controversial—it was undoubtedly a "real"

[1] Mia Consalvo and Christopher A. Paul's book *Real Games: What's Legitimate and What's Not in Contemporary Videogames* (2019) provides excellent research into the conditions that seem to surround games that meet cultural rejection. They identify these conditions as play mechanics, developer pedigree, a degree of depth and complexity, and whether or not they incorporate particular forms of payment structures.

game. *The Last of Us Part II*, however, also adopts rather conventional action play mechanics, yet it touched a sensitive nerve among players who went so far as to "review bomb" the game.[2] Unlike *Gone Home*, its status as a game was not questioned, but gamers nonetheless rejected it as the legitimate sequel of the celebrated first instalment, undoubtedly because of its inclusive gender and queer themes and the death of its former male protagonist, Joel. Ellie's perspective, which replaced Joel's, had infected the series' paternalistic origins, rebranding the series as Ellie's story rather than Joel's and thus causing *Part II* to be denounced by a vocal group of players (see Khollam, 2020; Tinner, 2020).

Girls and the idea of credibility *repeatedly* bump against one another in gaming cultures, whether encompassed by a game about girls, a game for girls, or girl players themselves. Now remember Ellie—not Ellie from *The Last of Us* this time, but the Ellie discussed in the introductory chapter, the fabricated Overwatch League player. The events surrounding Ellie are effectively the epitome of girls' uphill battle for credibility in videogame contexts. Yet like many so-called illegitimate Girlhood Games, Ellie—a symbol of the illegitimate—also carries transformative potential. Foregoing her creator Punisher's "social experiment," Ellie nonetheless ignited important discussions surrounding girls' status in e-sports. The fictional figure's ordeal prompted public condemnations of online harassment targeting girls' authenticity, while several conversations were held regarding the misogyny and ageism in competitive gaming (see Richardson, 2019; Colp & D., 2019). The events surrounding Ellie shows that issues surrounding girls and credibility in videogame culture extends far beyond game texts. Meanwhile, there are promising possibilities to cultivate from studying the illegitimate, which is evidently so often bound to girls.

The Girlhood Games discussed show that their transformative potential comes in many different forms, from heroic resistance and creative expression, to more transgressive performances of anti-heroic animalism. Certain Girlhood Games are more overtly feminist than others because they largely belong in a context oscillating between postfeminist media, which presents girls as already equal, and a trend of popular feminist media exploring usually non-controversial feminist issues. But deeper, more subversive interpretations can nonetheless be drawn when equipped

[2] "Review bombing" refers to a coordinated spamming campaign where a large number of low review scores are submitted to popular online review outlets for a particular media text.

with the relevant analytical frameworks. I have drawn on a myriad of theoretical perspectives ranging from developmental ideology, feminism and nostalgia, fairy tales and postmodernism, horror and queer theory, photography and cultural production studies, and more. In applying these lenses, I have offered a set of tools to better understand videogames about girls. Girlhood itself also becomes better understood through studying its representation through play systems.

Girl players, however, do not require knowledge of these theories to experience the transformative potential of Girlhood Games. As I have argued throughout, Girlhood Games are transformative because they offer girl players a liminal space to practice agency and subversive subjectivities that may not be as readily available in their social realities. To once more borrow Shira Chess' (2017) phrasing, "the playful is political" (p. 176). Traits like resourcefulness, curiosity, creative practice, institutional resistance, or rage are available to practice in the anti-structural and fictional spaces of Girlhood Games.

Girlhood Games are therefore promising resources for girl players to practice resistance, while their coming-of-age themes invite reflective identity experimentation. It is crucial to remember though, that girls are active in their engagement with them, which holds true to girls' relationship with media in general. Girls do not passively absorb the media they consume, but rather consciously negotiate their own meanings. They are agentic consumers that can consciously recognise when they are hailed and can critically engage with and construct distance from a text. It would therefore be a disservice to frame Girlhood Games as objects that tell or instruct. They do, however, provide opportunities. When playing a Girlhood Game, girl players enter a space in which to practice the traits as those identified above, while being exposed to narratives of patriarchal critique.

The subheading of this concluding chapter is "Virtual Voyagers," and it is inspired by a passage written by Turkle, who was already imagining the transformative possibilities of digital spaces in 1995. In the book *Life on the Screen*, Turkle (1995) writes that "the voyager in virtuality can return to a real world better equipped to understand its artifices" (p. 263). While girls are not the strict subjects of Turkle's words, nor were single player videogames, her words still powerfully resonate with Girlhood Games and their capacity to challenge the status-quo.

Turkle (1995) goes on to celebrate how virtual worlds elicit safe identity exploration, which may ultimately improve "real world" lives. In this way, girl players too can be considered as voyagers of virtual possibilities. Girlhood Games might therefore represent a digital answer to Mary K. Bentley's (1999) call for girls to have "safe spaces" to "run, play, and explore, without self-censoring" (p. 219). Without safe spaces, Bentley argues, "girls will not be fully able to discover who they are and who they would like to become" (1999, p. 220). A single-player game is a fitting avenue for such performances, where, albeit it through an avatar, girl players are indeed free to "run, play, and explore." But as this thesis has shown, they can also time-travel, wrestle with wolves, or even kill paedophiles, all of which would be otherwise difficult, prohibited, or simply impossible in structured society.

In celebrating the feminist potential of Girlhood Games' and their role in girls' identity construction, it is important not to overvalue their place. Girls draw on an insurmountable number of resources and experiences to craft their multidimensional and fluid identities. Even within the context of gaming, Girlhood Games are not an exclusive resource, which my discussion of girls' online cultures in chapter five began to address. Future research will expand how we understand girls' various forms of engagement with videogames, like how girls are hailed as players, or how they represent themselves through other games-adjacent activities, like streaming and e-sports. A more expansive historical analysis into girls' videogame subcultural practices would contribute greater nuance to girls' relatively overlooked cultural histories.

My analysis of Girlhood Games provides a foundation for these prospective areas of research. This study shows that the linkage between girls and games is becoming increasingly more normal. Simultaneously, the medium's prevalent association with boyhood is noticeably dissolving. At the same time, it seems somewhat ironic to point out that in one of the most hostile mediums for girls and women, Girlhood Games, despite their frequent cultural backlash, still receive substantially more accolades than teen girl television series or films, which remain frequently snubbed by critics and award bodies. Perhaps the difference lies in the fact that Girlhood Games are rarely developed with only girl players in mind, granting them greater cultural pedigree than girl-targetted media.

Girls' media is therefore still battling to be taken seriously and girl players too must still defend their authenticity. The centring of girlhood perspectives in gender-neutral texts is therefore a critical and positive step forward.

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Appendices

Title page figure

Max and Chloe in Chloe's truck. Screenshot from *Life Is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015) episode one.