

Twine, the Video-Game Technology For All

Photo



Porpentine, the creator of the critically acclaimed Twine game *Howling Dogs*. Credit Graeme Mitchell for The New York Times

Perhaps the most surprising thing about “GamerGate,” the culture war that continues to rage within the world of video games, is the game that touched it off. *Depression Quest*, created by the developers Zoe Quinn, Patrick Lindsey and Isaac Schankler, isn’t what most people think of as a video game at all. For starters, it isn’t very fun. Its real value is as an educational tool, or an exercise in empathy. Aside from occasional fuzzy Polaroid pictures that appear at the top of the screen, *Depression Quest* is a purely text-based game that proceeds from screen to screen through simple hyperlinks, inviting players to step into the shoes of a person

suffering from clinical depression. After reading brief vignettes about what the main character is struggling with — at home, at work, in relationships — you try to make choices that steer your character out of this downward spiral. The most important choices are those the game prevents you from making, unclickable choices with red lines through them, saying things like “Shake off your funk.” As your character falls deeper into depression, more options are crossed out. You can’t sleep; you can’t call a therapist; you can’t explain how you feel to the people you love. In the depths of depression, it all feels impossible.

Although Quinn expected negative reactions to the game, things became frightening this summer after she released the game through Steam, a prominent (and mainstream) gaming platform. A jilted ex-boyfriend of hers posted a nearly-10,000-word screed that accused her of sleeping with a journalist for positive reviews. The claim, though false, set off a wave of outrage that eventually escalated into a campaign against all the designers and critics who have argued for making gaming culture more inclusive. At their most articulate, the GamerGate crusaders denounce progressive voices in games (whom they derisively call “S.J.W.s,” or “social justice warriors”), claiming that they have needlessly politicized what should be mere entertainment. At their least articulate, they have carried out sustained and vicious harassment of critics, prompting at least three women to flee their homes in the wake of rape and death threats. In Quinn’s eyes, the real motivations are clear. This is a battle over not just entertainment but identity: who gets to be called a gamer, what gets to be called a game and who gets to decide.

Quinn had created graphically oriented games before, including the satirical Ghost Hunter Hunters. But she decided to make Depression Quest through an increasingly popular program called Twine. Although it’s possible to add images and music to Twine games, they’re essentially nothing but words and hyperlinks; imagine a digital “Choose Your Own Adventure” book, with a dash of retro text adventures like Zork. A free program that you can learn in one sitting, Twine also

allows you to instantly publish your game so that anyone with a web browser can access it. The egalitarian ease of Twine has made it particularly popular among people who have never written a line of code — people who might not even consider themselves video-game fans, let alone developers. Chris Klimas, the web developer who created Twine as an open-source tool in 2009, points out that games made on it “provide experiences that graphical games would struggle to portray, in the same way books can offer vastly different experiences than movies do. It’s easy to tell a personal story with words.”

Twine games look and feel profoundly different from other games, not just because they’re made with different tools but also because they’re made by different people — including people who don’t have any calcified notions about what video games are supposed to be or how they’re supposed to work. While roughly 75 percent of developers at traditional video-game companies are male, many of the most prominent Twine developers are women, making games whose purpose is to explore personal perspectives and issues of identity, sexuality and trauma that mainstream games rarely touch on.

Although plenty of independent games venture where mainstream games fear to tread, Twine represents something even more radical: the transformation of video games into something that is not only consumed by the masses but also created by them. A result has been one of the most fascinating and diverse scenes in gaming. The very nature of Twine poses a simple but deeply controversial question: Why shouldn’t more people get to be a part of games? Why shouldn’t everybody?

One of the most prominent and critically acclaimed Twine games has been [Howling Dogs](#), a haunting meditation about trauma and escapism produced in 2012 by a woman named Porpentine. The gameplay begins in a claustrophobic metal room bathed in fluorescent light. Although you can’t leave, you can “escape” once a day by donning a pair of virtual-reality goggles. Each time, you’re launched into a

strange and lavishly described new world where you play a different role: a doomed young empress learning the art of dying; a scribe trying to capture the beauty of a garden in words; a Joan of Arc-like figure waiting to be burned on a pyre. And each time you return to the metal room, it's a little dirtier and a little more dilapidated — the world around you slowly decomposing as you try to disappear into a virtual one.

“When you have trauma,” Porpentine says, “everything shrinks to this little dark room.” While the immersive glow of a digital screen can offer a temporary balm, “you can't stay stuck on the things that help you deal with trauma when it's happening. You have to move on. You have to leave the dark room, or you'll stay stunted.”

When I first met Porpentine outside a coffee shop in Oakland, Calif., she was wearing a skirt and patterned knee socks, her strawberry blond hair pulled back in a small plastic barrette. We decided to head to a nearby park, and as we walked across the grass, she pivoted on one foot — an instant, unconscious gesture — and did a quick little spin in the sunshine. When we arrived at a park bench, one of the first things we talked about was trash, because her Twine games teem with it: garbage, slime and sludge, pooling and oozing through dystopian landscapes peopled by cyborgs, insectoid empresses and deadly angels. In *Howling Dogs*, the trash piles up sticky and slow; in other games, like [All I Want Is for All of My Friends to Become Insanely Powerful](#), tar floods the room suddenly from an indistinct source. Forget pretty things, valuable things: Porpentine's games are far more interested in what society discards as worthless.

“Trash has very positive connotations in my world,” she said, trying to smooth the wild ends of her hair as the wind off a nearby lake kept bringing them to life. “A lot of my work is reclaiming that which has been debased.” A transgender woman who has faced harassment for much of her life, Porpentine referred to herself as “trash-bodied” several times as we talked. It's not an insult, she explained: “Me and my

friends, we hide in the trash. People call us trash, but we glorify in it.” At 14, she was kicked out of her home. It’s not an unusual story — an estimated 20 to 40 percent of homeless teenagers are gay, bisexual or transgender. When I asked her what she was doing before she made Twine games, she said, “Just surviving.”

“I was never on the streets or in shelters, but I struggled with housing my whole life,” she said. After leaving home, she found herself “in vulnerable situations where I was dependent on others — sometimes abusive people, sometimes kind people. I didn’t really have much control over what happened to me, and I was always one step away from homelessness.”

She created *Howling Dogs* shortly after she started hormone-replacement therapy in 2012, while staying in a friend’s remodeled barn. It took her only seven days to make it, but soon even mainstream gaming critics were praising it, and *The Boston Phoenix* named it one of the five most important independent games of the year. When the developer Richard Hofmeier won the grand prize at the Independent Games Festival that year for *Cart Life*, he celebrated his win by spray painting the words “HOWLING DOGS” across his booth, replacing his game with hers and telling people to play it. “I don’t want to say that it’s fun or I love it — it’s instilled me with what I call ‘holy dread,’ ” Hofmeier said in an interview after the festival. “It’s a very special kind of territory. Pragmatic, mechanical games can’t touch that kind of territory.”

At the same time, like most women with public personas on the Internet, Porpentine has also received her share of hostile feedback: emails and tweets wishing her dead, and at least one detractor who called the existence of *Howling Dogs* “a crime.” At the 2012 Interactive Fiction Competition, it won the “Golden Banana of Discord,” a prize awarded for the highest standard deviation — the game that was both the most loved and the most hated. One naysayer called it “about as much fun as randomly clicking links on Wikipedia.”

“I get really polarized reactions,” Porpentine said in Oakland. “I deal with really violent stuff, but I also get really loving, passionate stuff. It moves me very deeply.” She suggested that the backlash against her work came in part from the rarity of hearing a voice like hers at all: a transgender woman making challenging games about subjects many people would prefer to avoid. “A lot of my work deals with these topics of abuse that I feel are incredibly common to any feminine person’s life,” she said. “But it feels like this big secret. Life is hella traumatic. It’s weird to me, because if you have an injury, why wouldn’t you want to figure out the best way of dealing with it?”

Many people describe a sort of catharsis that they feel when they play Porpentine’s games. There’s a sudden sense of relief that something important but taboo has finally been acknowledged in a game, and perhaps has left them feeling less alone in the process. So many mainstream games are power fantasies, designed to deliver the bliss of limitless violence. Porpentine’s games tend to be poetic meditations on the scars that violence leaves behind, beautiful but claustrophobic landscapes that thrust players into positions of powerlessness and challenge them to work their way out.

In her game [Begscape](#), you become a homeless person wandering from town to town in a fantasy world, trying to scrounge up enough coins to eat and find a warm place to sleep. It is an experience of constant peril, where a single cruel act by a stranger — or a series of indifferent strangers — is all it takes to push you over the thin line between poverty and death. It’s also a deeply unfair game, which is of course the point, and a game you do not win so much as survive.

“I’m very concerned with the question of pain and how we survive,” she said. “Because sometimes we survive by striking to the heart of that pain and revealing it as a naked thing for the world to see. To say, No, you cannot turn away from this.”

Contrary to the stereotypes about gamers, nearly 50 percent of people now playing games are female, according to the Entertainment Software Association. Even more surprising, there are more adult women playing than there are boys under 18. The demographics of game creation, however, lag significantly. Developers are still overwhelmingly male, and most mainstream games cater to the interests and expectations of young middle-class men. Getting a job as a programmer at a traditional game publisher often requires proficiency in multiple programming languages, as well as a degree in game development or computer science — fields in which women are perennially underrepresented. Unlike Twine games, which are usually made by one person without cost, a “AAA” game from a major studio can have a development team of hundreds, cost tens of millions of dollars and take years to complete. Video games are now a roughly \$100 billion industry, exceeding (by some estimates) the global take of the U.S. film industry.

“The amount of people who have access to the engineering education required to be in programming is very, very small,” says Anna Anthropy, a game developer whose book “Rise of the Videogame Zinesters” helped put Twine on the map in 2012. “And even within that, there are a lot of ways that people are filtered out by the culture.” Anthropy has taught Twine workshops to everyone from 9-year-olds to 70-something retirees who had never played a video game in their lives, and she says they picked it up with equal ease. “If you’re someone who hasn’t played a lot of video games and you’re handed this tool where all you need to do is write, maybe you’re just going to write something about you,” she says. “Maybe you’re going to write something about your pet. There’s no reason you have to create something that’s about space marines.”

The beauty of Twine is that you can make games about almost anything. Over the last several years, it has also been used to create a memorial to a dead brother, a cannibal dating simulator, a 50,000-word interactive horror tale about being trapped in a spacecraft with a lethal alien. One of Anthropy’s most moving Twine

games, [Queers in Love at the End of the World](#), lasts only 10 seconds. The moment it begins, a timer starts counting down to an unspecified apocalypse; that's all the time you have to say goodbye to your lover before the world disappears. There's a poignant desperation in the brief experience that cuts to the heart of grief — the sense that you simply didn't have enough time with the person you loved. Rather than offering closure, the game leaves you empty and aching by design.

Although many Twine games focus on the personal experiences of the creator, [Player 2](#) by Lydia Neon shifts directly to the personal experiences of the players, by asking them to describe a painful, unresolved experience in their own lives and trying to provide them with a form of catharsis uniquely tailored to their experiences.

“It was a time when someone let me down,” the text reads initially, although the last few words are changeable; click on them, and you can cycle through a list of other options until they describe your own particular experience: “hurt me,” “belittled me,” “excluded me,” even “assaulted me.” Then it asks you to enter the name of the person who did it, because that's the real second player in the game: the person who hurt you.

“In a sense you've been playing with them since it happened, haven't you?” the game asks. “You haven't dealt with it yet, so there they are, in the back of your mind.” After offering you word choices to tell the story of what happened and how you feel, it asks if you want to do something about it. After all, the other person is just Player 2 now, and “you have the controller, not them.” It closes by encouraging you to either take action or come to terms with how you feel.

Player 2 is precisely the sort of experience that many critics would reject as “not a real game” for a variety of reasons: because it doesn't give the player enough power or control; because you can't win or lose; because it isn't a test of skill; or simply

because it's not "fun." Especially when a game focuses on narrative, how many choices, how much interactivity is necessary to create a game instead of just a story?

These debates are more than just pedantry, and the questions of authenticity that swirl around Twine games are the same ones that hang over so many of the people who make them: Do they really belong? When video-game fans insist on drawing hard lines around fluid definitions in ways that tend to align with cultural prejudices, perhaps it's time for them to start questioning whether what they're protecting is really more important than what they're keeping out.

Twine has particularly encouraged the development of game mechanics that capture personal and emotional experiences. Cara Ellison, a gaming critic who also made a Twine game called [Sacrilige](#), about one-night stands, says it's a sort of innovation rarely seen in mainstream games. "All of the tools that have been honed to make video games are essentially centered around violence and systems of violence," she says, rather than working to develop what she calls "mechanics of intimacy," ways that games might express emotional experiences and relationships.

"That's something I came up against when I was researching why video games don't approach sex or love or dating in a very consistent or interesting way," Ellison says. "It's led video games to seem like they only approach this one topic. I feel like that puts off particular people who want to explore more interesting themes that don't touch on violence. Text games are the perfect place to explore those issues."

Even when they do touch on violence, Twine games tend to do it in intimate and far more complicated ways. Last year, Merritt Kopas released a Twine game called [Consensual Torture Simulator](#), which allows you to step into the shoes of a dominant partner in a B.D.S.M. encounter. Although you are doing violent things to another person, they've all been negotiated clearly in advance; the other person might seem powerless, but the explicit insistence on consent and safe words

actually leaves the power in the hands of the submissive partner and revolves around his or her desires. Looking at violence through this personal lens also invites us to rethink the role of violence in mainstream action games. Not only is brutally stripping power from enemies usually the explicit point of these games, but the people you shoot, stab and kill are typically so dehumanized that the idea of thinking about what they want and how they feel — thinking of them as people at all — seems either ridiculous or horrifying. After all, it's not really what those games were built to do.

When dusk fell in Oakland, Porpentine and I walked around until we found a Japanese restaurant that Yelp applauded for its low prices and large portions. She was hesitant at first — she's on a budget, she explained. She makes her living (less than \$1,000 a month) from her games, through the crowdfunding website Patreon. But when I offered to cover it, she relaxed a bit, and we ordered a bunch of fancy sushi rolls, the kinds with names like Titanic and Lion King that come out covered in brightly-colored sauces and little flecks of tempura.

“It's been hard,” she admitted. “I'm looking into more ways to leverage what I've done and make money in ways that are not obnoxious.” She's working on a compilation of all her Twine games to sell independently, and when I ask whether she'd want her games on a larger platform like Steam — where *Depression Quest* found a significant audience but also significant harassment — she seems interested. It's a tension that comes up often when I talk to female Twine developers: the push and pull between going big and staying small, between art and commerce, between the comparative safety (and poverty) of smaller spaces and the mainstream visibility that allowed Zoe Quinn's game to reach so many people, even as it made her a target.

Although Porpentine is a bit guarded about specifics, she describes her childhood as a survival experience: an isolated, cultish upbringing in which she often retreated

into books to block out reality. “I would read all the time just to ignore what was going on around me, to ignore the yelling,” she said. “I’d read nutrition labels during every meal.” Words became her only form of escape; they started to feel like a physical part of her, and in some ways the only form of power she had.

“It makes me think of bargaining,” she said. “It makes me think of despair. If you’ve ever had to bargain for your existence, to beg for something to stop, if you’re physically powerless, as I was when I was a child, you’re thinking, Is there anything I could possibly say that would make this stop? You become very verbally dexterous.”

Ultra Business Tycoon III, another game by Porpentine, begins as a parody of an “edutainment” game from the 1990s — complete with its own antiquated shareware code. As a “prominent businessreplicant in the money business,” you are tasked with amassing a million dollars. But somewhere between embezzling money from your job and evading skeleton warriors, the barrier between the game and real life starts to dissolve. Just after you finish looting and demolishing the skyscraper of a rival corporation, the game inexplicably mentions that you pass your parents’ bedroom on your way out of the wreckage. It recalls the way the sunlight used to look in their room, how you used to feel safe there.

“You don’t know why they started hitting you. It just happened,” the narrator adds, apropos of nothing, and then whisks you back to your capitalist adventure.

Later in the game, the fourth wall slides away completely, and suddenly you’re a little girl sitting at a computer playing [Ultra Business Tycoon III](#) as your older sister creeps into the room to say what feels like an oddly permanent goodbye. After she departs, you — the player, the younger sister — are faced with only one choice to select: “Turn back to game.” Porpentine dedicates it to “the ones I left behind” and shifts away from text for a moment to display two images: drawings she received

from her younger sister, years after Porpentine left home.

This year, Porpentine released *Everything You Swallow Will One Day Come Up Like a Stone*, a game about suicide. One of her most moving games, it also remains one of the most obscure — largely because she distributed it for only a single day.

“This game will be available for 24 hours and then I am deleting it forever,” she wrote during its brief availability. “Suicide is a social problem. Suicide is a social failure. This game will live through social means only. This game will not be around forever because the people you fail will not be around forever.”

The concept for the game is tremendously simple. A number counter is set to zero, with plus and minus buttons beneath it to make the number bigger or smaller. “I counted this high,” it begins, and then the game is just that: counting up, though the purpose of doing so isn’t clear at first. I’ve played it four or five times now and never made it all the way through without crying.

Sometimes, nothing happens when you click to the next number; other times, words appear like stray thoughts. “Who would you miss if they were gone for a day?” it asks at one point. Keep clicking, and the word “day” is replaced by “month,” then by “year” and finally “forever.” Sometimes it asks you questions. Sometimes it tells you stories. At one point it quotes from the suicide note of a Czech student who killed himself by self-immolation, later from a news report about a woman who committed suicide after being raped. “This is the game,” it says.

The numbers start to feel like days, and the rhythm of clicking feels like passing time, like checking off days on a calendar. It isn’t always “fun,” per se; sometimes, when you click 10 or 15 times in a row and see nothing but an empty screen, a little part of you wonders when it’s going to end. But you keep on clicking. After all, what other choice do you have? It feels like surviving.

But somewhere around the number 300, the game decides to throw you for a loop. Click the wrong link — or the right one? — and it catapults you suddenly into the tens of millions. The moment you see it, your guts twist with panic; the space between where you were and where you are becomes a vast numeric desert, and the idea of clicking millions of times to get back seems impossible. You won't be able to do it, you think for a moment — you'll just have to quit the game. Then you remember you're playing a game about suicide.

“That's what it feels like to wake up insane or with trauma,” Porpentine said. “It's like, Oh, God, how do I get back there? It feels like it'll take a million days to get back, a million steps. That is the crisis. ‘Will I ever be the same again?’ And you won't.”

A few days after our interview, I came across a quotation by the theologian John Hull that reminded me of Porpentine's work — something he said, after going blind, about the power and clarity of coming to terms with profound loss. “I've come to think of blindness as like a sword,” Hull said. “It is as sharp as a sword, but it's got no handle. You have to hold it by the sharp end.” I emailed the quote to Porpentine and asked if it resonated.

“Holding a sword without a handle is probably better than no sword at all,” she wrote back.