

No, Really, It's OK: Exploring Trauma and Healing Through Video Game Creation

Michaela Dodd

A thesis submitted to
Auckland University of Technology
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Design

2020
School of Art & Design



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Abstract

The following exegesis is an autoethnographic enquiry into designing video games to reflect on personal trauma. Using the context of video game culture and design, I explore the capability that video games hold for expressing stories. Supplemented by the observation of healing benefits in autobiographical writing, I begin to investigate the possibility of a union between video games and autobiography. The practical components of my research are concerned with uniting these elements and how the process of combining them leads to personal insight.

My research approach uses poetry, audio posts and artwork as my mode of autoethnographic exploration. As such, the writing style of this thesis, while formal, will not be able to avoid embellishments of who I am, what I have experienced, and what I choose to create as a result.

Design research offers me a critical framework to investigate the healing benefits of telling one's story. This investigation intends to highlight to peers, young women and creatives alike that this work of research stands in solidarity against often unspoken traumas. I target this demographic as I explore with an autoethnographic lens. This exploration intends to bring awareness to the nuances of female-specific trauma and validate what may seem to be an unusual choice of using video games as an impetus for conversations about trauma.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed: Michaela Dodd

Date: 28/04/2020

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Charlotte, through everything, you never stop believing in what I am capable of. You see my potential in a way that helps me see it, too. I hope to always do the same for you.

I dedicate this exegesis to the memory of my friend, Emmy.

Introduction



Figure 1 Dodd, Michaela. *Hoppt*. 2020. Digital art.

He is visiting me in my dreams again

This horrible ghost who is not him

He can feel me pulling at the roots

That have calcified inside of me. For the first time,

He is not a sick whisper of dread.

I am watching him, head on

As he is a cacophonous roar.

This practice-led research project intends to explore personal trauma by designing video games to promote healing and solidarity. The desire to examine specifically female trauma in this thesis derives from personal experience, justifying utilising myself as a qualitative and autoethnographic research tool.

When I was an adolescent, I had a boyfriend who abused me. When my trauma symptoms aligned with diagnostic criteria for PTSD, I experienced cognitive dissonance. To me, I was

“weak”. Why should my unhealthy relationship give me the same symptoms of trauma as war and famine?

The following research is a culmination of growth that has occurred in the context of healing from traumatic events, and the context of my growth as both a young woman and designer. None of the content explored is easy to discuss. Sometimes, the academic context feels directly contradictory to the subjects discussed. Even in design, a field noted for liberalisation, there appears to be this constant, fighting dichotomy between deeply personal insights and the rigid framework that validates research as high-quality.

“Autoethnography can be distinguished by how it affords authors the flexibility to position themselves in relation to the social, cultural, or political in ways that are otherwise off-limits to traditional empirical approaches to qualitative research.”¹

With this in mind, the following exegesis equips itself with the social contexts of a woman, a young adult, and a designer. There are many other lenses I could apply to the study of myself, but I have chosen the above ones as they were the strongest lenses I could identify as tools for navigating my own trauma.

The following work embarks on an exploration of game design, inspiring the hypothesis that video games are a valuable tool for expressing the discoveries of autoethnographic enquiries.

It would be remiss of me to identify the potential of video games for compelling storytelling without acknowledging the problematic cultures and attitudes that exist within video games, their producers and their players. Currently, the video game industry is a source of hostility

¹ Sherick A. Hughes and Julie L. Pennington, *Autoethnography: Process, Product, and Possibility for Critical Social Research* (2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks California 91320: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483398594>.

towards minorities.² Game companies are notorious for their indecent treatment of employees, and the cisgender white male rhetoric gatekeeps video game production.³ My conviction that video games are powerful storytellers for the marginalised is reinforced by the iterative works of authors such as Anna Anthropy and Kara Stone. As well as engaging with an academic inquiry into the videogame medium, both Anthropy and Stone utilise videogames as a form of “autobiography”.⁴

In gentle terms, this research is self-healing through design. The goal is to use this research to publicly suggest the liberation of self-study, and the beauty of sharing those findings within the interactive realm of a playable video game.

² Gabriela T. Richard and Kishonna L. Gray, “Gendered Play, Racialized Reality: Black Cyberfeminism, Inclusive Communities of Practice, and the Intersections of Learning, Socialization, and Resilience in Online Gaming,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 39, no. 1 (2018): 112, <https://doi.org/10.5250/fronjwomestud.39.1.0112>; Brooke Bennett, “Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games,” *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 5 (September 3, 2018): 959–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1498144>; Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis, UNITED STATES: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=1912575>.

³ Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw, “We Are All Fishes Now: DiGRA, Feminism, and GamerGate,” *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 2, no. 2 (April 5, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.26503/todigra.v2i2.39>; Hayley R. Crooks and Shoshana Magnet, “Contests for Meaning: Ableist Rhetoric in Video Games Backlash Culture,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (December 21, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v38i4.5991>; Gabriela T. Richard and Kishonna L. Gray, “Gendered Play, Racialized Reality.”

⁴ Kara Stone, *Ritual of the Moon*, PC, 2019; Anna Anthropy, *Dys4ia*, PC, 8-Bit Retro Game (Newgrounds, 2012).

Research Question



Figure 2 Dodd, Michaela. *Fox Cunning*. 2020. Digital art.

“Given the gender stereotypes and underrepresentation of women in mainstream video games, how can I explore game-making and artefact design with autoethnographic resonance to observe the process of creating autobiographic assets as a possible avenue of healing and confronting personal trauma, in such a way as to disrupt the current misogyny of video game culture?”

I intend to document and reflect on my process of creating personal video games, pieces of poetry and artwork. I will investigate whether the personal nature of these artefacts facilitate self-healing as I design them. While I am interested in the effect that video games with personal narratives may have on video game players, this exegesis primarily focuses on the effect of making video games for the video game designer. All creative and written components that are produced for this research enquiry can be found on the following website: *traumaeater.squarespace.com*

Contextual Review

My initial research enquiry began with the foreknowledge that “playing autobiographical video games is important”. This sentence is vague on purpose. What is *important*? Who gets to quantify such an empty vessel of a word? My implicit hypothesis was that the playing of autobiographical video games could be used as a mode of healing for those who experience trauma. I felt that, if a traumatised person were to play a video game that reflected on elements of trauma that were similar to their own, a sense of solidarity might then be established. This solidarity could then facilitate healing. I began my research already predicting its conclusion.

It was a subconscious battle with myself as all of my reading suggested that there was perhaps more prosperity for novel, valuable research contributions in observing the *making* of such a game than the *playing* of it. There was also a delayed recognition that the less I tried to predict my conclusion, as I had been doing, the more information I would authentically gain. If one gains solidarity or healing by playing a therapeutic game, what does one gain by producing one? Here, I discovered the real space of my research. Indeed, the importance of autobiography, as informed by theorists such as Judith Herman indicates that it is a reclaiming, reframing and re-understanding of traumatic events that allows one to begin healing.⁵ Within this, the “auto” of “autobiography” is paramount in assisting such a process. I am privileged inasmuch as I enjoy producing art, poetry and writing. Such tools allow for a valuable way to explore and re-familiarise myself with my trauma. They also create a tangible output which others can then interact with.

My refining process began with identifying keywords and criteria that mark literature as relevant to my research. Unsurprisingly, many of the terms were both fields of academic

⁵ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror (New York, NY, US: Basic Books, 1992).

inquiry and nouns to describe me, such as ‘feminist’ and ‘queer’. Consequently, I decided that all readings I studied for my research needed to pertain to one or more of the following terms:

- Feminist
- Queer
- Trauma
- Methodology
- Autobiography
- Video Games
- Female Author
- Autoethnography

Ultimately, I display my literature review findings under three subheadings: *Anger and Empathy*, *Trauma and the Author* and *Disruption*. These subheadings encapsulate my most important discoveries in relation to answering my research question.

Typically, the term “video games” does not inspire one to think of things such as trauma or autobiographical storytelling. That is not to imply that there is no relationship between these terms whatsoever. The following contextual review identifies the budding relationship between games, autobiography and trauma, and the possible directions in which this relationship may progress. While highlighting the potential space in video games to observe the power of autobiography, I also contextually analyse the current culture of video games. The culture that currently exists is one that is historically embedded in a foundation that makes it more challenging to produce and play games if one belongs to a marginalised group.⁶ Theorists such as Anna Anthropy, trans feminist game designer, and Gabriela T Richard, provide a more in-

⁶ Gabriela T. Richard and Kishonna L. Gray, “Gendered Play, Racialized Reality.”

depth analysis of this problematic space, which I will investigate further in the *Disruption* subsection.

Using video games as a space to observe trauma may appear a contradictory intention for a myriad of reasons. In the current culture of game design, there is a predominant focus on *fun*. For the everyman, one assumes that one plays a game for *entertainment*.

“The traditional and often myopic focus on fun forecloses a rich array of emotions – among them anger, annoyance, fear, alarm, and hurt – that can in fact shape a game's message as much as (if not more than) its content and mechanics. By contrast, looking at games that go beyond fun creates new spaces for players, games, and queer worlds at the margins”.⁷

In this quote, Ruberg connects the terms “queer”, “anger” and “video games”. Ruberg identifies here that games hold *potential space* for marginalised groups and their stories. Ruberg also highlights that while the main emotion one anticipates from a game is *fun*, both game design and emotional response are concepts too nuanced to be capable of only achieving a singular output (such as “fun”). Video games are especially adept at engineering a range of emotional responses. I will explore my justification for this claim further into my contextual analysis.

My research aims to create experiences that may still have the end outcome of “fun”, but reflect on the further range of emotions that facilitate a “fun” result. Frustration and anger, feelings that are inherently understood as unfavourable, can be paired with reward and achievement to facilitate a “fun” response. These same emotions can offer the doorway into acceptance and empathy, as explored further in this contextual review.

As a disclaimer before diving into video games, anger and empathy:

⁷ Bonnie Ruberg, “No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games That Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt,” QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking 2, no. 2 (2015): 108–24, <https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.2.2.0108>.

The following discussion can, at times, be contradictory. Current observations on empathy in a video game context have value for me as a designer wanting to make deeply personal video games. However, some theorists and designers caution against calling a video game, especially one reflecting their own experience, an “empathy game”.⁸ Theorists such as Anna Anthropy have produced games that are classed as “empathy games”⁹ by players and writers. Anthropy dislikes this title, expressing that “if you've played a 10-minute game about being a transwoman” you are no closer to being able to “understand a marginalized experience.”¹⁰

My current stance remains that video games are powerful storytellers. I explore the climate surrounding “empathy games” to gain understanding about how to create personal and meaningful artefacts most effectively. My goal is that these empathetically designed components can then aid in my process of healing from trauma.

⁸ Ilayda Hanci, “Experiment in Empathy: Anna Anthropy’s Dys4ia,” Medium, April 15, 2017, <https://medium.com/@ilaydahanci25/experiment-in-empathy-anna-anthrophys-dys4ia-7398ecf3f776>.

⁹ Patrick Begley, “‘Empathy Gaming’ Focuses on Emotions and Moral Decisions,” October 30, 2014, <https://www.smh.com.au/technology/empathy-gaming-focuses-on-emotions-and-moral-decisions-20140904-10ch4z.html>.

¹⁰ Cecilia D’Anastasio, “Why Video Games Can’t Teach You Empathy,” *Vice* (blog), May 15, 2015, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/mgbwpv/empathy-games-dont-exist.

Anger and Empathy



Figure 3 Dodd, Michaela. *Her Skull*. 2019. Digital art.

You don't hurt now.

You are an accessory that I almost forget is there.

It's just that you're there every fucking time.

You are a habit to think of, now, and it's not one I control.

I wish whatever bitter brainstem hangs to you

Could just let you go.¹¹

¹¹ Michaela Dodd, *The PTSD Game*, November 26, 2019, Poem, November 26, 2019, <https://moddsterofdesign.tumblr.com/post/189319284142/the-ptsd-game>.

Anna Anthropy identifies that games are "especially good at communicating relationships" because of their structure (rules) and space for play (user input).¹² In a video game, a player can explore the space in any way they choose to. The game, in turn, responds to the player's exploration. Particular exploration will yield no results, or adverse results (e.g., in-game death), while other exploration yields rewards. This system is a fundamental tautology for almost all videogames. We, as players, witness the purest form of relationship in interaction by either gaining reward or negative consequence in response to what we do. Anger plays a role in this mode of interaction, too – and the following section focuses in on the space that frustration has in fostering empathy.

Frustration Empathy:

My contextual review identifies two new terms for my game design vocabulary: “frustration empathy”¹³, as defined by theorist Anna Anthropy, and an “empathy fallacy”,¹⁴ explored in detail by Garry Crawford and Muriel Daniel in their academic text *Video Games as Culture*. Crawford and Daniel's exploration of “empathy fallacy” dually informs of the positive influence of empathy and the danger of assuming full comprehension of someone else's lived experiences.

Anna Anthropy also warns users of succumbing to the “empathy fallacy”. Her video game *Dys4ia* uses an 8-bit art style to explore elements of undergoing hormonal replacement therapy.

¹² Anna Anthropy, "Chapter 1: The Trouble with Videogames," in *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-Outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012).

¹³ Kawika Guillermo, “Can You Live A Video Game? Autobiography & Living The Author In Video Games,” Medium, April 19, 2018, <https://medium.com/anomalyblog/playing-the-author-video-game-autobiographies-46367939c70a>.

¹⁴ Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford, "Video games beyond escapism: empathy and identificaton" in *Video Games as Culture: Considering the Role and Importance of Video Games in Contemporary Society* (Milton, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2018), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=5323257>.

Some players, in response to *Dys4ia*, feel that they gain a new understanding of the trans experience. Anthropy exacerbates that they take their self-assigned enlightenment too far, declaring in a tweet, “if you are a cis person & you think you've ‘learned empathy for trans women’ by playing dys4ia, you are wrong. flush yrself down the toilet.”¹⁵ Anthropy's identified “frustration empathy” is a unique understanding of empathy. She highlights a specific perspective that is only gained through experiencing frustration. This “frustration empathy” is difficult to express in forms of media other than video games. Anthropy shares how video games are the best vessel for doing so.

“Frustration empathy”, in the context of video games, is when a player's sense of frustration at difficult elements of the game provides a means of understanding frustration in a different context, for example, a different lived experience. Things that are almost exclusively related to games, such as 'difficulty settings' and 'game mechanics' (such as 'dying' when failing to complete a level correctly) offer space for frustration. Anna Anthropy's 2012 game *Dys4ia* uses this frustration found to allude to the frustrations surrounding Anthropy's lived experiences and tribulations in receiving hormonal replacement therapy. *Dys4ia*'s protagonist (the player) experiences multiple mini-games that allude to Anthropy's experiences in first seeking out hormone replacement therapy.

15 Anna Anthropy, “If You Are a Cis Person & You Think You’ve ‘Learned Empathy for Trans Women’ by Playing Dys4ia, You Are Wrong. Flush Yrself down the Toilet,” Social Media, Twitter (blog), November 24, 2014, https://twitter.com/adult_witch/status/536971719949287424.

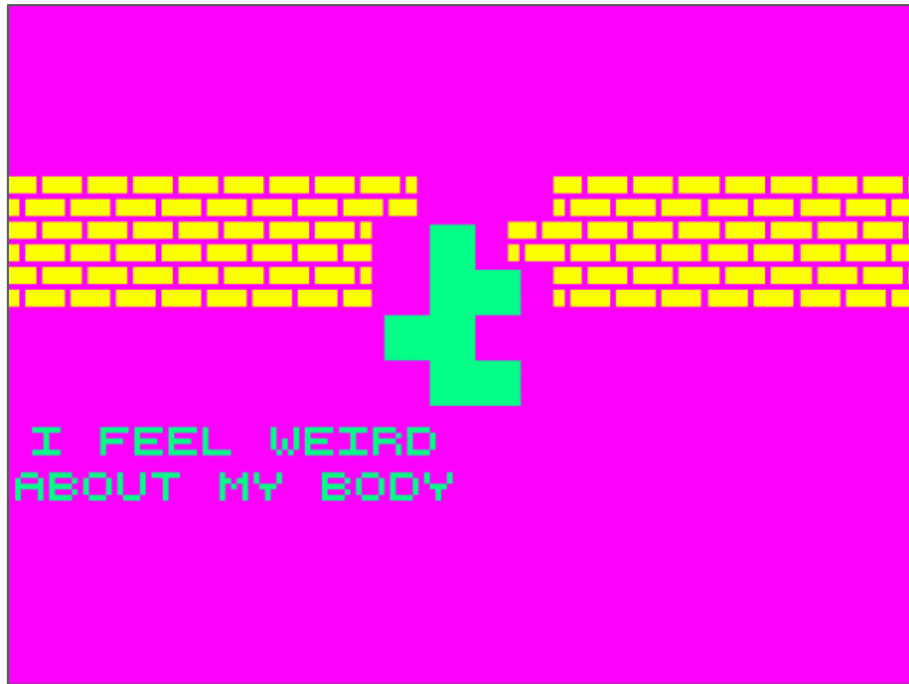


Figure 4 Anthropy, Anna. *Dys4ia*. 2012. Video game.

Figure 4 highlights a strong example of in-game frustration, which then produces “frustration empathy”. The player assumes the role of a *Tetris*¹⁶ piece. The world of *Dys4ia* is designed to make it impossible for the player-controlled *Tetris* piece to move through the yellow wall. *Tetris* itself is a game about quickly modifying the orientation of a piece of geometry so that many pieces of geometry line up effectively together. In presenting the player as an unusable *Tetris* piece, Anthropy's game implies that no matter what the player does, they cannot fit in. One can interpret the unfitting of the *Tetris* piece as a parallel to the unfitting of being trans in a cisgender society. Anthropy takes the mode of “frustration empathy” one step further (quite literally) in her consequent game *Empathy Game*.¹⁷ Fellow queer theorist Teddy Pozo expands: “In 2015, Anna Anthropy used the old adage of ‘walking a mile in someone's shoes’ in an installation called *Empathy Game*, part of *Babycastles Presents Anna Anthropy Presents the*

¹⁶ Alexey Pajitnov, *Tetris*, Multiple Platforms, 1984.

¹⁷ Anna Anthropy, *Empathy Game*, Physical Walking Simulator, 2015.

Road to Empathy. Attendees could literally walk on a treadmill in a pair of the artist's old boots. Walk a mile to earn a single point, and write your score on an analog chalkboard.”¹⁸

The analogue and indexical relationship to the author work together, highlighting the frustration of the arduous task of walking a mile. While not inherently a *video* game, this mode of transgressive play still connects back to the “frustration empathy” that video games facilitate. Video games offer more space for “frustration empathy” than other mediums. You cannot be expected to watch the same scene from a film 15 times over or read the same sentence fifteen times. In the case of video games, such repetition is expected. Take 2018's Matt Thorson's *Celeste*,¹⁹ for example, where a core mechanic of the game is the expectation that the player will continuously die. *Celeste* uses this repetition – this core space for frustration – to implement its message that perseverance is necessary for self-growth. With this understanding that video games can allow for “frustration empathy”, I decided to situate my creative output in the realm of video games. For me, anger is a core part of my trauma. Video games give me the best opportunity to replicate the frustration that has been internalised and express it outwards, within an appropriate venue. I do not hurt myself nor anyone by releasing my anger through designing a video game. There is also an incentive to use anger, an emotion that I have felt embarrassed or weak for having, and identifying its usefulness in creating video games, poems, art and a website in such a way as to provide creative artefacts that may help myself and others in sharing empathy and understanding.

¹⁸ Teddy Pozo, “Queer Games After Empathy: Feminism and Haptic Game Design Aesthetics from Consent to Cuteness to the Radically Soft,” *Game Studies* 18, no. 3 (December 2018), <http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/pozo>.

¹⁹ Matt Thorson, *Celeste*, PC, 2D Pixel-Platformer (Matt Makes Games, 2018).

The Empathy Fallacy:

“Despite being powerful devices that make unexpected associations with the most varied agents, video games also show significant limitations when it comes to fostering processes of empathy and identification.”²⁰

In a medium that appears so optimised to foster empathy, insomuch that it has almost a unique mode to do so, there is a fear of the damage this sense of attained understanding may cause. Theorists and game designers caution game consumers against the following fallacy: because they have played a simulation of another's life, they now know more of what it means to be that other.²¹ A popular example of a simulation game is *Escape from Woomera*, a 2004 point-and-click-game intending to simulate the life of an Iranian asylum seeker.²² The reality of simulation games is that they will never mirror lived experiences fully. Simulations can foster empathy and aid in understanding but cannot allow the player to appreciate the lived experience fully. Harm arises when someone feels that they now understand the lived experience, without truly experiencing it. This fallacy of thinking may stop one from continuing to learn about other people and their experiences.

Some theorists express concern about the cognitive dissonance that may arise from a saturation of media visualising traumatic content. Similar to the reasoning of the long-term debate on video games and violence,²³ Muriel and Crawford caution this as "a dissonant empathy process by which video games, far from connecting us with other realities, are estranging us from them

²⁰ Muriel and Crawford, *Video Games As Culture*.

²¹ Anthropy, "If You Are a Cis Person & You Think You've 'Learned Empathy for Trans Women' by Playing *Dys4ia*, You Are Wrong. Flush Yourself down the Toilet"; *Escape from Woomera*, PC, Point-and-Click, 2004; Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford, "Chapter 6: Video Gamers and (Post-)Identity," in *Video Games As Culture: Considering the Role and Importance of Video Games in Contemporary Society* (Milton, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2018), 135–41, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aut/detail.action?docID=5323257>.

²² *Escape from Woomera*.

²³ Philip M. Boffey, "Do Violent Video Games Lead to Violence?," Dana Foundation, November 1, 2019, dana.org.

even more"²⁴ due to desensitisation. In the same way that studies have voiced concern over a saturation of violence in video games leading towards a genuine laissez-faire attitude to violence in real life, theorists worry that the media depiction of trauma may desensitize us to the true calamity of referenced situations.²⁵

It is critical to be cognizant of the fact that, while I admire video games and believe that they are powerful storytellers, they are not a limitless medium. Video games are mathematical entities. They are made from digital code, and the gameplay experiences that arise are often a result of the combination of the process of game scenario, player input, and changed outcome. The binary processing of a game does not hold the capability to infer every nuance of real existence, no matter how powerful the engine the game is produced with, or how talented the writers are in making their game. As a result, a game *maker* cannot intend to engineer the full experience of how a player will feel in playing games. The game *maker* also cannot create an experience (such as Anthropy's *Dys4ia*, mirroring her experience of hormonal replacement therapy), that encapsulates *every single* feeling of an experience. Lived experiences can only be fully understood by those who live them. While video games may help to share aspects of the game maker's story, it is critical to understand that there will always be feeling, intention and information missing.

My video game artefacts will be deeply personal. In reviewing the contentious nature of discussing empathy in video games, I decided that I do not want to engineer a video game with the primary intent of affecting *others*. I can produce a game – or many small components that can be used in a game – that bear reference to my traumatic experience. I can do this in a literal or abstract way. What I cannot do is then decide how my players will feel about the game. As

²⁴ Muriel and Crawford, Video Games As Culture.

²⁵ Boffey, "Do Violent Video Games Lead to Violence?"

a designer, it would be meaningful to me if players of my video games felt moved by the game playing experience. However, my utmost intention is to design these games for myself. It is my empathy for my own journey through my trauma that I am concerned with.

Trauma and the Author

“The first principle of recovery is empowerment of the survivor. She must be the author and arbiter of her own recovery. Others may offer advice, support, assistance, affection, and care, but not cure.”²⁶

Trauma exists as a permanent state of contradiction. To cope with traumatising events, it feels safer to withdraw from society and the care of others. Trauma asks us to be silent.²⁷ My abusive relationship was a year and a half of learning how to be quiet and curl into myself. Healing asks us to unlearn this. It asks us to uncoil slowly.

This section of my literature review explores autobiography. It does so with the assumption that we already acknowledge the power of autobiography as a healing tool. The question I explore in this section of my research is: Can game-making be an act of autobiography? Is it fair to call games with facets of truth autobiographical? In the following discussion, I will posit theories as informed by readings, but I offer no conclusive decisions. What I *do* state is that, in whatever mode of self-recounting, my creative outputs based on my experiences in an abusive relationship still de-centre the current problematic focal point of trauma. I will revisit this focal point in my conclusion to this section, and my summary section of this contextual review.

²⁶ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*.

²⁷ Herman.

It surprises me as I make my way through my research enquiry to see that the very term autobiography has come under hot contention. The literal Cambridge interpretation is: “a book about a person's life, written by that person.”²⁸ Already, we see a qualifier that omits my work from being interpreted as an autobiography. I am not producing a book – I am creating art, poetry, and video game components.

Within autobiography studies, there are empirical modes of thinking that contest the importance of truth-to-circumstance autobiographies versus those with expansive fictional interpretation. My master's research does not offer the appropriate scope for such discussions. Instead, I offer my understanding of autobiography in the semantic context of my work: for the sake of my research, I will take a deconstructed understanding of autobiography. The subject must be self-produced and self-focused, with *some relationship* to a life event. That nebulous relationship can be as indexical or as abstract as one chooses. For some, this interpretation of what an autobiography is does not align with how they perceive their own creative works. Phoebe Gloeckner, a graphic novel author, expresses her discomfort with aligning her work to the term “autobiography”:

“‘OK,’ she says, taking a deep breath. ‘I believe that all art is about the artist,’ she says. ‘So, yeah, my work is about me. But being an artist - art is artifice, it's creation. By reading that book, you're not experiencing what I experienced. You're perhaps experiencing my interpretation of it, but you're bringing yourself to it. In that way, I always hesitate to say this is a true story. I'm not attempting in any way to make documentary. You can never represent everything. It's always a selective process.’”²⁹

²⁸ “AUTOBIOGRAPHY | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary,” accessed January 19, 2020, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/autobiography>.

²⁹ “Not Your Mother’s Comic Book | Salon.Com,” accessed January 19, 2020, <https://www.salon.com/2003/03/15/gloeckner/>.

The above quote is from an interview with Phoebe Gloeckner when asked about the autobiographical nature of her comic book, *Diary of a Teenage Girl*. *Diary of a Teenage Girl* recounts aspects of Gloeckner's adolescence, with components of the comic lifting direct quotes from Gloeckner's childhood diaries. Even with a direct, indexical relationship to the past, Gloeckner hesitates to call her work autobiographical.

Another theorist who wades through the exploration of self-stories (or autobiographies) and video games is academic novelist Kawika Guillermo. Guillermo explores his conflicting viewpoints surrounding the relationship between autobiography and video games in his online article *Can You Live a Video Game?*³⁰ Guillermo mentions the vast array of emotions that videogames offer in their play:

“Personal games have radically different outcomes than literary or film biographies. I found myself stressed, hurt, aggravated, saddened, through the act of play. I didn't get much of a sense of the identities of the developers or writers, or what was at stake or being broadcast about the identities they were writing. They made me feel a different kind of empathy, one not welded to a subset of peoples, but one rooted in the anger and loathing I, too, feel for the systems and standards all around us.”³¹

Guillermo identifies that, while there is more emotional range offered to the audience, video games seem to have a thicker production-based wall to distance the game designer from the player. One can list a name of film directors and authors with relative ease – but to ask for a chief game designer? One instead reaches for the name of entire game companies. It is only with the introduction of *indie games*, games produced in their entirety by a small group of designers, that the *author* in games can start to unveil themselves. Guillermo's conclusion

³⁰ Guillermo, “Can You Live A Video Game?”

³¹ Guillermo.

mirrors Gloeckner's where he disconnects his own stories from the term "autobiography", stating that "games speak to me as a fiction writer who writes personal, but not autobiographical stories, who, too, likes to blur identities into faceless pixels, but still tell about real experiences that deeply affected me."³² If both Gloeckner and Guillermo desire to distance their work from the term "autobiography", why am I still ardent to align the term with my own work?

My justification steps briefly out of the realm of the academically informed framework that one expects to encounter in a contextual review: my trauma was worsened by the disbelief of others that I truly *experienced any trauma at all*. The biggest disbeliever was often myself.

Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* mentions the difficulty in acknowledging trauma: "It is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering."³³

If the contention of the term "autobiography" is the "truth" that autobiographies should or should not hold, it is critical to me to call my creative outputs pieces of truth. To evade such terminology evades my right to the intensity of my traumatised emotions. I refuse to pretend that my relationship – which other people may have had different perspectives towards – did not damage me in the ways that I identify. My hurt is not a lie – and the poetry, artwork, video games and website I create while thinking about my trauma contain more raw truth than a step-by-step recounting of what externally happened to me at seventeen.

³² Guillermo.

³³ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*.

Disruption

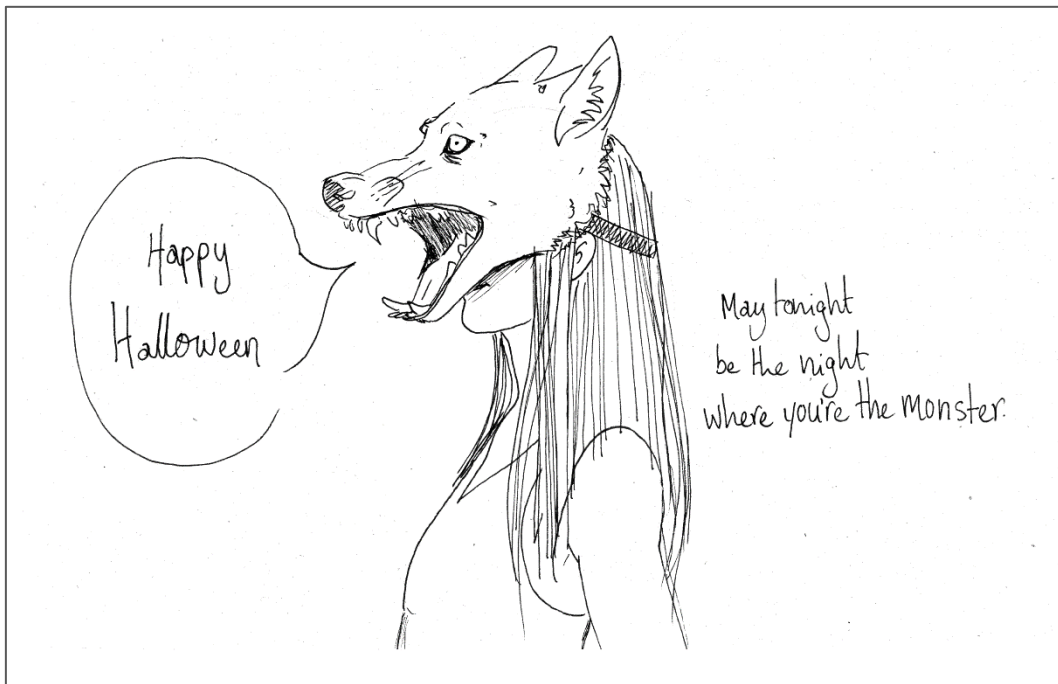


Figure 5 Dodd, Michaela. *Halloween*. 2020. Pen on paper.

“Our goal is not to move queerness from the margins to the center. Rather, we aim to de-center the center, to resist the very hierarchy that dictates that certain ways of knowing and being are marginal or central.”³⁴

This final section, *Disruption*, holds my core reasoning. It also contains other valuable points of enquiry that I have discovered. In this section, I ask myself: How will my research add to current knowledge?

Before I can answer that, I must ask what the *point* is. What is the reason that I enquire so heavily into empathy and autobiography? What do I want to *do* with this information that will benefit me in my endeavours?

³⁴ Bonnie Ruber and Amanda Phillips, “Not Gay as in Happy: Queer Resistance and Video Games (Introduction),” *The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 18, no. 3 (December 2018), http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg.

Disrupt.

I want to *disrupt* the current trauma narrative of a cisgender, heterosexual man that currently exclusively dominates the video game sphere. I want to *disrupt* the personal, interpersonal and structural blockers that inhibit myself and others from looking at my own, *ugly* trauma.

Currently, video games offer minimal space for me to observe my trauma. At present, video games are recognised as units for entertainment. Predominantly, they are designed for the white, cisgender male rhetoric.³⁵ This game climate is not cogent with being a space for me to look at my trauma. However, I hypothesise that while the current video game climate bars me from this excursion, this is not a permanent state for the industry. To understand how to change the way that video games currently relate to me, as a woman and as a trauma-sufferer, I must first identify what is currently problematic. Indirectly, video games affected my belief that I had suffered trauma. I had learned, through the enjoyment of game-playing, that trauma – especially PTSD – was reserved for “true trauma sufferers”, someone who looked more like a war veteran than a teenaged girl. This implication was fed to me through the over-saturation of war video games. It was further reinforced by video games' abhorrent current relationship to sex – which, at this point, is often little more than a place of comedy.³⁶ To encompass all of this: Video games and their production currently fester in the male-exclusive narrative. I am joining female and non-binary gamers and designers to disrupt this space.

³⁵ Bennett, “Gaming Representation”; Gabriela T. Richard and Kishonna L. Gray, “Gendered Play, Racialized Reality.”

³⁶ Bennett, “Gaming Representation.”

Outside of game *content*, the current accepted process of *game-making* feeds into this walled-up echo chamber to produce, market and sell with an exclusively masculine lens.³⁷ In this section of my contextual review, I will dissect my following claims:

- 1: War games can negatively impact trauma sufferers.
- 2: Sex representation in games is damaging everybody.
- 3: The production of games is historically and structurally designed to exclude minorities.

Within these claims, I will posit how my research offers new perspectives in which to combat the issues identified.

³⁷ Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-Outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*; Gabriela T. Richard and Kishonna L. Gray, "Gendered Play, Racialized Reality."

1: War Games: Fighting For No One to Win

Gathering information for my first claim, that war games can negatively impact trauma sufferers, has been the most challenging part of my contextual review. The most prominent enquiries into mental health and video games ask us to assume a negative stance. In essence, psychology theorists often explore video games and mental health to ask about the *violence* of video games, and its effect or lack thereof on players.³⁸ Often, they observe the violence of video games and hypothesise a relationship between video game violence and anti-social behaviour of the player.³⁹ Within this observation of violence, however, studies are exploring the potential of playing war games to both exacerbate trauma from war and conversely their potential to heal trauma symptoms for war veterans.⁴⁰

If we are assigning bountiful time, resources, and research to the violence of games, who are we excluding? Who are we ignoring? This enquiry identifies a gap in the research field of video games. Game designers and theorists are going as far as to identify *some* relationship between video games and trauma but are not going further. I wish to push this enquiry to ask what video games can do to become a "*possible avenue of healing and confronting personal trauma*" for women and other marginalised communities.

³⁸ Boffey, "Do Violent Video Games Lead to Violence?"; Christopher Ferguson, "Do Angry Birds Make for Angry Children? A Meta-Analysis of Video Game Influences on Children's and Adolescents' Aggression, Mental Health, Prosocial Behavior, and Academic Performance," APS Association for Psychological Science, Perspectives on Psychological Science, 10, no. 5 (2015): 646–66.

³⁹ Ferguson, "Do Angry Birds Make for Angry Children? A Meta-Analysis of Video Game Influences on Children's and Adolescents' Aggression, Mental Health, Prosocial Behavior, and Academic Performance."

⁴⁰ Darryl Etter et al., "Modern Warfare: Video Game Playing and Posttraumatic Symptoms in Veterans," Journal of Traumatic Stress 30, no. 2 (April 2017): 182–85, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22172>.

2: Sex in Video Games: Shoot the Prostitute for Fun

Multiplayer first-person shooter (FPS, the most popular style for war games) video games often contain what I refer to as a “topic space” for women and the queer community. In video game group chats, either a text-accessed or voice-accessed space for players to communicate in real-time while playing games, you will often hear discussions about gender and queerness. The discussion that transpires is rampantly damaging and aggressive. Kyle Kontour describes likely chat encounters in his PhD Thesis *War Masculinity and Gaming*:

“For instance, rarely does an online session pass without at least one player uttering ostensibly homophobic or misogynistic epithets. Faggot (or nearly as often, ‘homo’) is probably one of the most commonly uttered words in multiplayer play when referring to other players...” “...In fact, homophobic terms in general tend to confer a great deal more playfulness and respect than overtly misogynistic terms like pussy, a term which is usually leveled at players deemed to be weak, ineffectual, or prone to complaining.”⁴¹

With homophobic and misogynistic language almost being cultural code for video game players, it is no surprise that video games are commonly considered an exclusive activity for cisgender males.⁴² Statistics around what video games are most commercially successful and popular worsen the damage of misogynistic and homophobic hostility. *Entertainment Software Association* identifies that 27.5% of video games sold in United States in 2016 were “shooter games”, with the FPS game *Overwatch* hosting 75,000 online articles mentioning its name

⁴¹ Kyle Kontour, “War, Masculinity and Gaming in the Military Entertainment Complex: A Case Study of ‘Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare’” (PhD Thesis, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Colorado, 2011), https://www.academia.edu/2009348/War_Masculinity_and_Gaming_in_the_Military_Entertainment_Complex_A_Case_Study_of_Call_of_Duty_4_Modern_Warfare_.

⁴² Chella Ramanan, “The Video Game Industry Has a Diversity Problem— but It Can Be Fixed,” *The Guardian*, March 15, 2017, sec. Games, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/mar/15/video-game-industry-diversity-problem-women-non-white-people>.

(Statista, 2017).⁴³ Kontour elaborates that “shooter games” hold the most violent space for homophobic and misogynistic connotations.⁴⁴

What I can do as a researcher is acknowledge the popularity of video games and video game genres with problematic cultures. I then arm myself with this knowledge and question the problems that arise with such a concentrated focus and make decisions about the video games I buy, play, and produce. If my research leads by example, there is hope that this new knowledge will go on to inform others, proposing alternatives to our current gaming climate.

Shooter-style games are not the only popular form of video games. Video games such as *The Sims 3*⁴⁵ are being identified as the best-selling PC games of all time around the world – with 7.95 million units of *The Sims 3* sold as of January 2018 (VGCHartz, 2018).⁴⁶ *The Sims 3* is a simulation game where the player can take control of a virtual household, assigning each household member different desires and fears. Other commercially successful games that diverge from the FPS genre are easy to identify, such as *Pokemon*⁴⁷ and *Breath of the Wild*.⁴⁸ While not openly misogynistic video games, these games do not *allow* space for gender discussion at all. We are still not welcoming queer and female gamers in from the margin. By playing video games that ignore gender, it can be argued that we are ignoring the context of gendered hostility. I refuse to agree with the “boys will be boys” notion of staying complicit in

⁴³ “2018 Video Game Industry Statistics, Trends & Data - The Ultimate List,” WePC.com, May 15, 2018, <https://www.wepc.com/news/video-game-statistics/>.

⁴⁴ Kontour, “War, Masculinity and Gaming in the Military Entertainment Complex: A Case Study of ‘Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare.’”

⁴⁵ Lindsay Pearson and JoAnna Lio Amos, *The Sims 3*, Multiple Platforms, Life Simulation (Electronic Arts, 2009).

⁴⁶ “2018 Video Game Industry Statistics, Trends & Data - The Ultimate List.”

⁴⁷ Satoshi Tajiri, *Pokemon*, Multiple Platforms, RPG (Nintendo, 1996).

⁴⁸ Hidemaro Fujibayashi, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, Nintendo Switch, RPG (Nintendo, 2017).

the popularity of FPS games and their player culture without acknowledging the damage they can cause.

One of the most famous examples of open hostility towards women being part of a video game's core design is *Grand Theft Auto 5 (GTA5)*.⁴⁹ *GTA5* is one of the most financially successful games of all time, earning \$6 billion in revenue as of 8/27/2018.⁵⁰ Women are of two 'breeds' (I use an animalistic term with full intention) in this game: She is either an overbearing, whining, stupid housewife or she is a prostitute. Players can enjoy the in-game animations of sex with prostitutes – complete with overzealous voice acting (which implies that women were paid to be complicit in the way that *GTA5* wants to portray women). Sex with prostitutes in *GTA5* is also exclusively focused on activities that are implied to be for the male pleasure – such as oral sex. The depiction of women in *GTA5* is seen as predominantly humorous and enjoyable for those that play the video game. Below I have selected the top comments responding to a YouTube clip⁵¹ from the game in which one of the three protagonists, Trevor, is having sex with and receiving oral sex from a prostitute. Among the highest-rated comments were the following statements:

“Now I see why guys like to plays this”

“Where boys became men lmao [*sic*]”⁵²⁵³

⁴⁹ Leslie Benzies and Imran Sarwar, *Grand Theft Auto V*, Action-adventure (Rockstar Games, 2013).

⁵⁰ Craig Smith, “Interesting Grand Theft Auto V Statistics and Facts,” VGS - Video Game Stats, November 18, 2017, <https://videogamesstats.com/grand-theft-auto-v-statistics-facts/>.

⁵¹ “(48) GTA 5 - Picking Up a Prostitute [PC, 1080p] - YouTube,” accessed February 24, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=areeZj10InU>.

⁵² “lmao” is an abbreviation of the phrase “laughing my ass off. It is used to indicate that something is funny.

⁵³ “GTA 5 - Picking Up a Prostitute [PC, 1080p] - YouTube.”

One GameSpot employee, Carolyn Petit, does not see the humour in derogatory female representation. She goes on to describe her experience of *GTA5* in the following GameSpot excerpt:

“Characters constantly spout lines that glorify male sexuality while demeaning women, and the billboards and radio stations of the world reinforce this misogyny, with ads that equate manhood with sleek sports cars while encouraging women to purchase a fragrance that will make them ‘smell like a bitch.’ Yes, these are exaggerations of misogynistic undercurrents in our own society, but not satirical ones. With nothing in the narrative to underscore how insane and wrong this is, all the game does is reinforce and celebrate sexism. The beauty of cruising in the sun-kissed Los Santos hills while listening to ‘Higher Love’ by Steve Winwood turns sour really quick when a voice comes on the radio that talks about using a woman as a urinal.”⁵⁴

Her experience of the game received upwards of 20,000 negative comments.⁵⁵ Many of the comments were direct threats to Petit or personal criticisms. Mainstream games are not just exclusive to men. They are openly hostile toward women. Some studies identify this aggression also being expressed in the real-world, but the validity of these research findings is under much empirical contention.⁵⁶ Anecdotally, I have felt hyper-aware of my gender, and its lack of space within the realm of video game playing.

⁵⁴ “Grand Theft Auto V Review,” *GameSpot* (blog), accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/grand-theft-auto-v-review/1900-6414475/>.

⁵⁵ “Grand Theft Auto V Review.”

⁵⁶ Jesse Fox and Bridget Potocki, “Lifetime Video Game Consumption, Interpersonal Aggression, Hostile Sexism, and Rape Myth Acceptance: A Cultivation Perspective,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 31, no. 10 (June 1, 2016): 1912–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260515570747>; Johannes Breuer et al., “Sexist Games=sexist Gamers? A Longitudinal Study on the Relationship between Video Game Use and Sexist Attitudes,” *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking* 18, no. 4 (April 2015): 197–202, <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2014.0492>; Christopher J. Ferguson and John Colwell, “Understanding Why Scholars Hold Different Views on the Influences of Video Games on Public Health,” *Journal of Communication* 67, no. 3 (2017): 305–27, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12293>.

The rampant masculine toxicity that currently permeates video game culture may act as a deterrent towards minorities to create and play games. To refute this, I feel a critical need to insert my own work amongst this toxic climate. It is not a welcoming space – yet – but it is still a compelling space for narrative enquiry that I intend to explore. The agency put into the relationship between a game and someone *playing the game* asks for a level of reactivity that powers the ability for deep emotional resonance.⁵⁷ In my own exploration of video games for autobiographical storytelling, I hope to harness the power of video games to foster a healthier relationship between games and minorities. My research wishes to confirm that games do not need to be a "no girls allowed" zone.

3: How Are Games Made? Long Hours, Gender Domination

Unfortunately, even the *making of games* has situated itself in a structural context that discourages those outside of an able-bodied, cisgender male rhetoric to participate.

Anna Anthropy, before her excursions as an independent game producer, briefly spent time within the commercialised game industry. Anthropy informs her readers in her novel *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* that there is a “false sense that the knowledge needed to create videogames is unattainable without special institutional training.”⁵⁸ The concept of mandatory institutional training is just one of many invisible barriers placed between minorities and video game production. Games themselves were first engineered by those who were expected to be in engineering, mathematics and software design in a university context in the 1970s – almost

⁵⁷ Robin Burks, “How Video Games Have Become The Perfect Storytelling Medium,” Tech Times, September 14, 2015, <https://www.techtimes.com/articles/84016/20150914/how-video-games-have-become-the-perfect-storytelling-medium.htm>.

⁵⁸ Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-Outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*.

exclusively white cisgender men.⁵⁹ While African Americans and Latinos are playing more frequently than the Whites and Asians populace, they only make up 2.5% and 8.2% respectively of the game development community.⁶⁰ Women make up 22%, and trans folk are identified in less than 0.7% of the community.⁶¹ None of this context is conducive to queer or female designers being active in the video game space. The current industry has its doors closed to us – which is why we must work in an adjacent context (see Anna Anthropy's *Dys4ia*).⁶²

Kara Stone, a video game developer and theorist, rejects the industry standards which dictate that the creative process of making video games should be driven by deadlines. Stone, instead of the 16-hour-days that the industry demands⁶³ suggests we observe “sustainable practices of making”, those that can “follow the ebbs and flows” of creativity.⁶⁴ The active decision to take time as opposed to “producing by the deadline” is synchronous with the needs of healing from trauma. Stone highlights this, too, identifying that time itself is “a flow of action and recovery, of tiny traumas and mundane distress”.⁶⁵ Using Stone's article to inform my decisions around how to approach my research, I was aware upfront of the limits that would be present in my research. My intention was not to have a completed video game as a central focus and final endpoint of my study – just as my purpose is not to be “fully healed”. Instead, the value of my research lies in the process – of systematic and methodical self-discovery and iterative exploration of ways video game principles/elements/concepts can be used to articulate experiences of trauma in a way that is meaningful to both me as a female game designer and

⁵⁹ Gabriela T. Richard and Kishonna L. Gray, “Gendered Play, Racialized Reality.”

⁶⁰ Gabriela T. Richard and Kishonna L. Gray.

⁶¹ Gabriela T. Richard and Kishonna L. Gray.

⁶² Anthropy, *Dys4ia*.

⁶³ Jason Schreier, “Crunch Time: Why Game Developers Work Such Insane Hours,” Kotaku Australia, May 16, 2015, <https://www.kotaku.com.au/2015/05/crunch-time-why-game-developers-work-such-insane-hours/>.

⁶⁴ Kara Stone, “Time and Reparative Game Design: Queerness, Disability, and Affect,” *Game Studies*, the International Journal of Computer Game Research, 18, no. 3 (December 2018), <http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/stone>.

⁶⁵ Stone.

as a player affected by trauma. The hope of this line of enquiry is that, in undertaking this exploration from an autoethnographic perspective, I may be able to offer my findings in such a way as to benefit others.

Therefore, the specific objectives of my research were as follows:

- To explore the ways video games could be used as a medium to explore and express experiences of personal trauma - in a way that is empathetic, safe, empowering, and therapeutic for those often marginalised and stigmatised through mainstream games. The primary focus here is to observe how the process of making video game artefacts can help trauma survivors.
- To disrupt the trauma/gender/sex stereotypes and discourses currently found in video games, and on a personal note, to refuse the societal tensions that ask me, as a trauma sufferer and as a woman, to be complicit in the structures that ask me to be silent.
- To celebrate the narrative potential of video games, in improving my own craft of video game making.

To encompass these objectives, I reinstate the research question I use to aid in my research intentions:

“Given the gender stereotypes and underrepresentation of women in mainstream video games, how can I explore game-making and artefact design with autoethnographic resonance to observe the process of creating autobiographic assets as a possible avenue of healing and confronting personal trauma, in such a way as to disrupt the current misogyny of video game culture?”

Methodological Statement

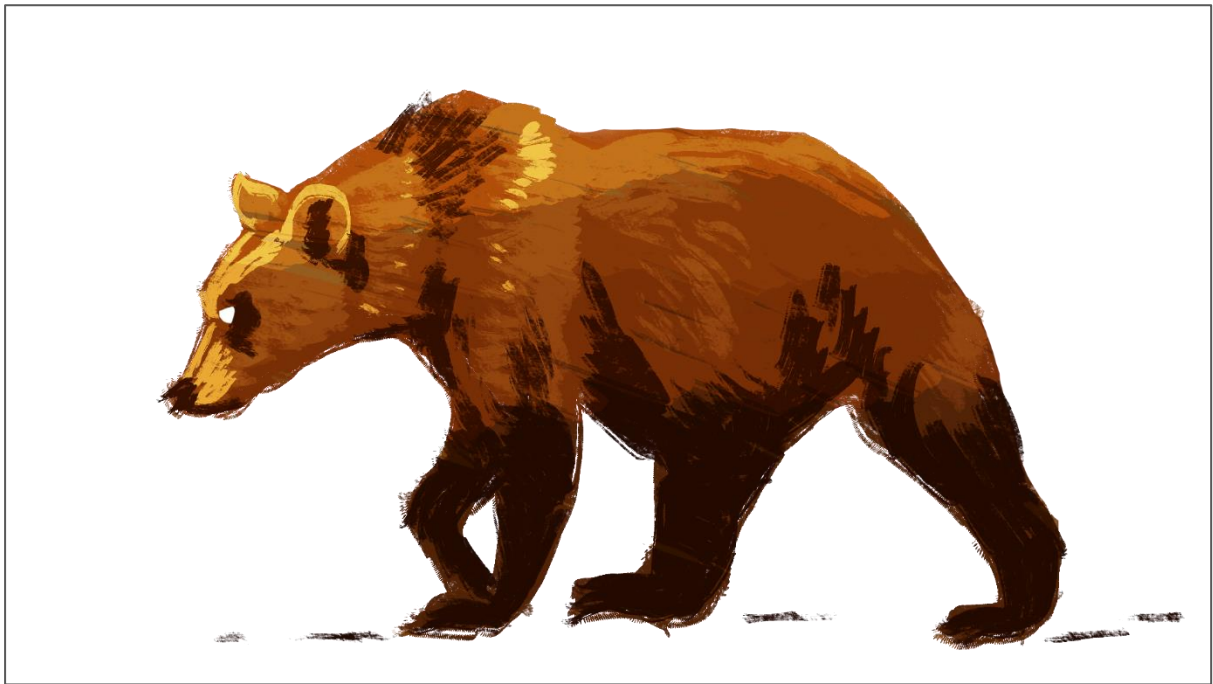


Figure 6 Dodd, Michaela. *Bear*. 2020. Digital art.

My research intention was to explore game-making and artefact design. I wished to test the experience of game-making, to observe what relationship may exist between the making of games and the observation of personal trauma. I enquired as to whether this could provide a space for healing. To address my research goals as formalised in the contextual review section of this thesis, I decided that my methodology needed to pertain to both research enquiry and contribute towards improving my skills as a practitioner.

To aid my research enquiry, I chose to:

- Explore how I could create autobiographical video games.
- Trial the different modes of art and design that could communicate my autobiographical ideas.
- Reflect and iterate on how the process of making was affecting me as a researcher, game designer, woman and trauma survivor.
- Actively insert myself and my work into the video game culture. My scope for this was within the Auckland game design community.

To reinforce the success of these research enquiries, I made practice-related intentions:

- I wanted to improve my skills as a practitioner. I desired to use my research enquiry to motivate myself to become better at digital art, writing and coding in the C# language.
- No matter what, I wanted the process of making? creative artefacts to come from a space of unrehearsed feeling. To explore my trauma, I needed the writing style for poetry and video game artefacts produced to be *allowed* to be free-flowing.
- Holistically, there was a desire to learn better *communication*. At a core level, this was to ensure that I can story *tell*. At higher levels, this was to learn how to communicate *effectively*. My research ran concurrently with a teaching role at *Auckland University of Technology*, and this required constant improvement of my ability to communicate ideas.

To answer my research question, I chose the primary methodological frameworks of autoethnography and action research.

Autoethnography – Sharing the Self

Ellis et al.⁶⁶ identify autoethnography as a method of analysing the experience of one person to examine the knowledge of an entire culture. The term “culture” can be as exclusive as a handful of people, to a statistically substantial demographic.⁶⁷ One defines the culture being observed in their studies. Most poignant is Ellis et al.’s identification that “autoethnographers value narrative truth based on what a story or experience *does* – how it is used, understood and responded to.”⁶⁸ Autoethnography is more concerned with subjective truth than quantitative analytical data. For the profoundly personal nature of my research, the methodology needed to allow personal subjectivity.

I have chosen an autoethnographic approach to observe trauma. The themes I discuss will be both isolated and universal. Because I am addressing something as sensitive as trauma, it is most appropriate to focus my lens on my own experience exclusively. However, autoethnography infers that my experience is permanently connected to others. My trauma does not live in isolation of real-world effect, and neither shall my research into finding modes of healing through video game design. By writing from my own experiences, I provide a window to observe both myself and others. This observation is not concerned with being a holistic observation of self and culture but does aim to provide *more* context than that which currently exists.

⁶⁶ Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (November 24, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589>.

⁶⁷ Ellis, Adams, and Bochner.

⁶⁸ Ellis, Adams, and Bochner.

Action Research – Oops I Did It Again

Action research is “a form of enquiry that enables practitioners to investigate and evaluate their own work, so as to improve practice”⁶⁹ and it involves a practitioner making many rapid productions of artefacts. The practitioner then observes what is created, reflects on how to improve or alter the outcome, and initiates the making process again. The process continues in a cyclical nature.

Action research in the context of my research is concerned with a constant reflective relationship between myself and my work. While I did not intend to yield complete games, but rather focus on the process itself, the design decisions made in concept art have grown through reflective practice and iterative revisions. The same is to be said for my game prototypes – of which there are three in total. Each is produced only after the former is finished, observed, and revised. I based my revision upon the simplistic criteria of “what do I like?” and “what moves me?”. These questions allowed my video games to maintain significance to me as the designer and game player of my produced works. Idealistically, I will be able to visit my prototypes outside of the period of conducting this research and still surmise feelings of empowerment and healing.

Muratovski provides a crucial distinction of action research in that it should be “based around a problem, dilemma or ambiguity from the situation in which the practitioners may find themselves.”⁷⁰ As per my contextual review, I have already identified an array of problems in the current practice of video game design and the nature of the video game culture. The reflective nature of action research has allowed me to reconsider how games can be reimagined to mitigate or confront these problems.

⁶⁹ Gjoko Muratovski, *Research for Designers: A Guide to Methods and Practice* (California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2016).

⁷⁰ Muratovski.

Methods

Telling, Collecting, Drawing, and Playing:

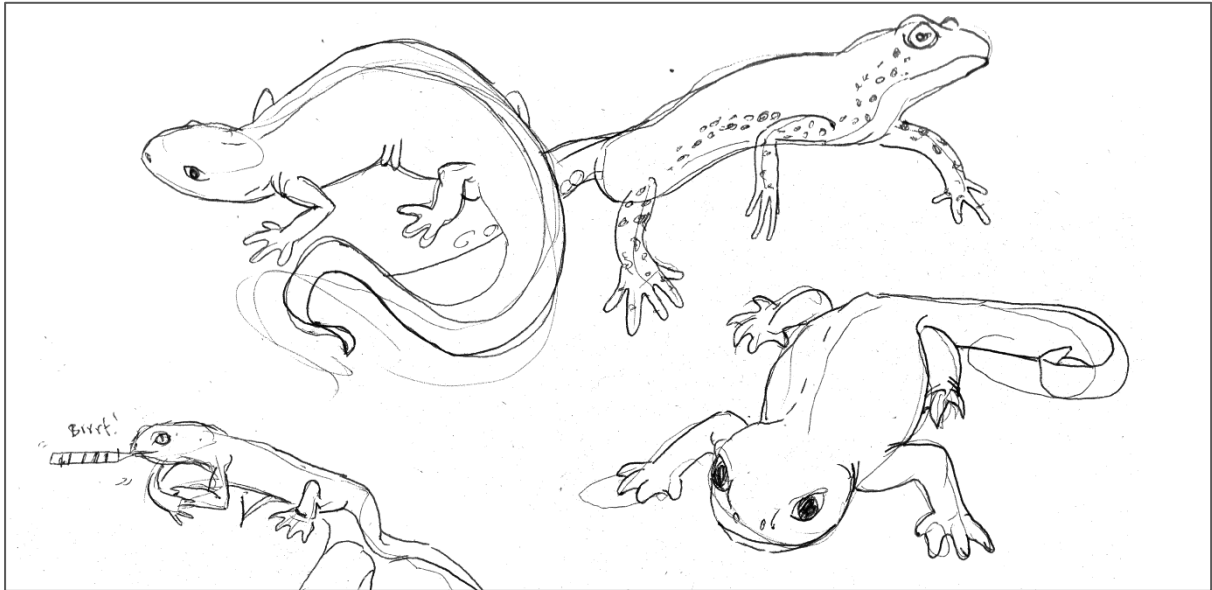


Figure 7 An assortment of newts illustrated for *Inktober*.

The main autoethnographic methods I applied were online blogging, generating audio logs, producing poetry, drawing over specific photographs and playing *Dungeons & Dragons*.⁷¹ To embark on my autoethnographic journey for this research, I built a personal blog on *Tumblr* (moddsterofdesign.tumblr.com). I chose *Tumblr* because it was the same platform I used to express many feelings, both of love and distress, during the traumatic phase of my adolescence. There is an irony that I return to these tumultuous stomping grounds to incite healing.

Tumblr makes uploading content easy. I filtered my posts with “tags”, meaning that one can only observe the content of a specific “tag” if they so choose. I formatted these tags into two primary terms: “consume” and “produce”. The “produce” tag contains anything I made during

⁷¹ Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, *Dungeons & Dragons*, Tabletop RPG, Fantasy, 1974.

the span of this research. The “consume” tag contains anything that I have read, played or watched that I felt bore significance to my enquiry.

With the blog created, I began a selection of reviews about content that inspired my research. The analysis of the literature was made to inform me of what I, as a consumer of content, enjoy. Under the “produce” tag of my *Tumblr* blog, one can specify “produce poetry”. Here is where all the poems produced by me in the last year and a half exist. As this research continued, I expanded from written reviews into producing audio logs. While intending to write in a relaxed manner, I observed that it was easier to speak with less anxiety about perfectionism than it is to write in this way. Less time was needed to talk than to write, and I value the indexical quality of the genuine voice of the researcher permeating through audio logs. These audio logs served the valued purpose of also holding the potential to be directly implemented into video games I produce. I emphatically enjoy the idea of the author’s voice transpiring in the space of the video games they create. Video games are especially compelling for this experiment, as the author’s voice in video games (as referenced in my contextual review) is so often obscured.

Finally, I used my character in a long-standing campaign of *Dungeons & Dragons*⁷² to roleplay, in the space of absurdity and humour, the type of trauma that I have experienced but cannot verbalise to my peers. This process is described in more detail in the section that follows.

⁷² Gygax and Arneson.

Learning, Improving and Prototyping:

To support my practice and improve my technical skills, throughout the year of this research, I participated in drawing classes, an online *Udemy* course on coding in C# language, tutored at the university, and took part in a popular Internet event *Inktober* – a “drawing challenge” that artists often participate in by “doing one ink drawing a day the entire month [of October]”.⁷³ The intention of all of these activities was to improve my skills in art and video game design. Overall, participating in *Inktober* served as technical practice and as a reframing of my thoughts and feelings towards producing art.



Figure 8 Day 10 drawing for "Inktober", where I only had whiteboard markers available.

To create my playable artefacts, I first followed the lesson plan of my *Udemy* course,⁷⁴ and then modified the output of that to be able to fit my research. To create game prototypes, I also utilised the online graph-drawing software *draw.io* and the *Unity* game making engine.

While I can quantify technical skills such as art and coding, the growth that transpired in this year for my ability to communicate is more challenging to pinpoint.

⁷³ “Inktober,” Inktober, accessed March 5, 2020, <https://inktober.com>.

⁷⁴ Ben Tristem and Rick Davidson, “Complete C# Unity Developer 2D: Learn to Code Making Games” (Online Course, Udemy Online Academy, 2018), <https://www.udemy.com/course/unitycourse/learn/lecture/10602858?start=330#overview>.

I did not immediately identify the connection between my research and my tutoring role at the university. However, thoughts of my research would near-constantly intercept my planning for tutorials. Often, I would discover a new theorist within my research, and their research would become a source of value for my students. The inverse is true, too. My tutorials served as a constant iterative space on how to inform and be interesting. Each tutorial was a micro-performance, and I needed to gauge if students resonated with a lesson or not. As my role as a tutor is specifically about *design theory*, my master's research and its specific intention to create *new* theory continued to feed into my tutorials and vice versa. From my tutorials, I had a work-based incentive to be pushing my research constantly. Both my research and my tutorial content would, however, lose its potency if I could not portray either skillfully. It is one thing to have information *worth* sharing but learning how to make the sharing engaging is a process that I will improve upon always.

“Critical reflection” as a research method is understood as the active cognizance towards implicit biases, both of a topic and a practitioner.⁷⁵ Critical reflection asks one to be aware of “the connection between oneself and social context/structure” as it can “function in powerful ways”.⁷⁶ This awareness will, in turn, “provide a platform for transformative action.”⁷⁷ For my research, critical reflection was paramount in holding myself accountable for an *active* awareness in my process. I must be aware of what the video game culture is, and I must be mindful of what lenses I bring into my research. Critically, I must ask myself when my own perspective works as a deterrent to fruitful inquiries. In the scope of this research project, my lenses of feminist scholar and game designer have aided my work. Still, I do not doubt that I

⁷⁵ Jan Fook, “Chapter 26: Reflective Practice and Critical Reflection,” in *Handbook for Practice Learning in Social Work and Social Care, Third Edition*, 3rd ed. (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2015), 440–41.

⁷⁶ Fook.

⁷⁷ Fook.

have excluded avenues of enquiry that may have produced rich and potentially different findings from my video game ideas. I am especially curious as to how trauma may be explored through the lens of different ages, or various social contexts other than the survivor being female. I validate my decision to use a refined lens in the fact that the output of my research enquiry is predominantly for autoethnographic, self-focused discovery.

The next section describes how the above methodological frameworks and methods were employed to explore and express experiences of personal trauma through the lens of videogames to promote healing and solidarity.

Description of Practice

The result of my research enquiry takes shape in the form of a collection of poems, static images, my *Tumblr* blog (which exists more as a site of raw data than polished output), my research website, three prototype video games and the exploration of all these separate components within my exegesis.

Moddsterofdesign.tumblr.com is the *Tumblr* blog, *traumaeater.squarespace.com* is my final website. All of the above artefacts can be found on *traumaeater.squarespace.com*.

Throughout the description of my practice, I will be referring to the critical subcategories identified within my contextual analysis: *Anger and Empathy*, *Trauma and the Author* and *Disruption*.

Narrative Content and Visual Expression of Trauma

Much of the exploration towards narrative was done with static imagery or words. These are tools that have been in my proverbial arsenal since before going to university. I have always identified art and writing as ways to express my feelings. It was no surprise to see that they resurfaced as the main modes of narrative output. I also used the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* to explore what it is to express a character who has suffered trauma.



Figure 9 Dodd, Michaela. *How Many Fucks?* 2020. Video game.

One of my first experiments in autoethnographic *making* happened by mistake. There is an informal context needed to explain the importance of what happened in relation to my research: I was browsing my Facebook for photos of myself from when I was younger and happened upon a long-forgotten folder. This folder contained pictures of a specific night out. In these photos, I was seventeen and heavily self-conscious and in love. I remember my absolute joy at these photos at the time of their conception some six years ago as they statically showed the world everything I wanted. I was tanned in these photos. I was wearing my abuser's jumper, which made me look slim and bundled up in the images. I was smiling. In more than one of the pictures, I had my boyfriend draped across me. We were at the beach at night-time. For all its subjective static beauty, these pictures confronted me. On the day I first viewed these photos, years ago, I was so happy with them. I was also at the peak stage of my life wherein I was in the middle of abuse, could not see that I was *being abused* and had no coping tools.

Because of their wealth of emotional resonance, I found myself turning these photos into creative artefacts. Eventually, I decided to draw over the photographs. I changed the photos from “me and him” to both becoming anonymous. I wrote over them. I began to reclaim memories tangibly. I began to “paint the truth” over them by editing them myself.

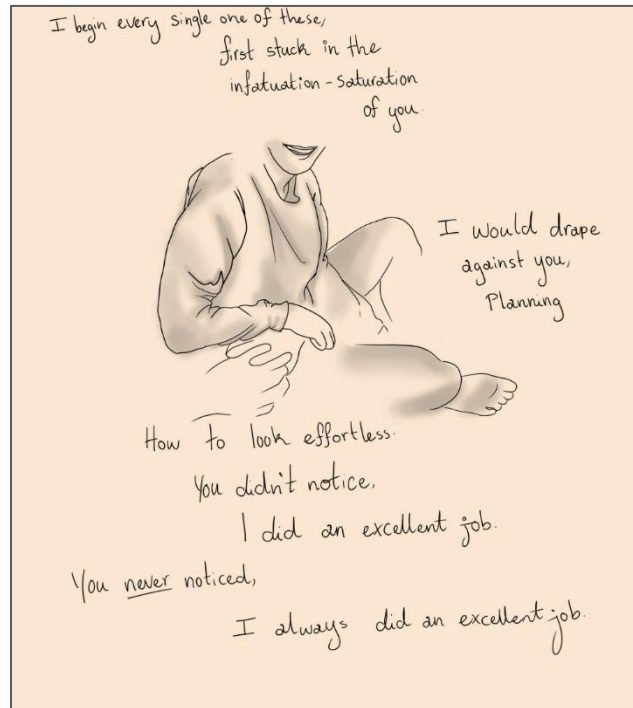


Figure 10 Dodd, Michaela. *Reclaim..*. 2019. Digital art.



Figure 11 Photo from Waiheke in 2014.

I keep one of these “reclaimings” in a frame in my room. It is a simple pen line drawing. It does not mean much of anything to guests who come into my bedroom. It is my favourite thing I have created.

I am not at a point where I would share this nature of art within my video games. Here is a line of intimacy that I would not want to cross. However, this meditative reclaiming as an activity instilled in me the validation and power of creating this entire exegesis to aid my trauma recovery.

Poetry:

My poetry explores the feelings of my trauma, my relationship to my abuser, and manages to capture moments of vulnerability that I would not feel comfortable expressing in any other way. Poet June Jordan powerfully states: “poetry is a political act because it involves telling the truth”.⁷⁸

My poetry was often generated in times of heightened emotional awareness – predominantly in times of emotional distress. As such, my poems are not “polished” at all. However, my intention for them is not to have polished writing. I wanted to capture emotion at the time of feeling it most strongly.

The game artefacts that I present as the primary design components to this research all place a heavy emphasis on poetry and prose. The text within each of my three games is the core focus. My smallest game, titled *How Many Fucks?*⁷⁹ is three scenes long and while visually appealing, is all about the text in the game as the “message” that I want for myself and other players. In the case of *How Many Fucks?* the player is asked how many “fucks” they give (how much they still care) about “them”. I have left the term nebulous and genderless, with the assumption that players will automatically assign someone into that space. From the first question, players get one of two response screens. If they select any option other than “none”, a wolf appears, teeth bared, telling them that that’s “far too many” and to try again. If the player selects “none”, the wolf is seen docile and asleep, with the text that “it’s not easy getting to this point” and that the player “deserves a rest”. In *How Many Fucks?*, I wish to remind myself and by proxy others

⁷⁸ June Jordan, “Poetry Is a Political Act Because It Involves Telling the Truth,” in *Affirmative Acts: Political Essays* (Anchor Books, 1998).

⁷⁹ Michaela Dodd, *How Many Fucks?*, PC, Point and Click, 2019.

who may play, that the healing I want the most is when my abuser takes no more mental space. When I can give zero “fucks”.

Eden:

In *Dungeons & Dragons*,⁸⁰ you invent and roleplay a character – giving them a backstory that explains their motivations within the game. During the span of this research, I roleplayed a character named Eden Smallfern. Eden was a dark-elf druid. She was chaotic, unkind, self-sabotaging and hypersexualised. Eden had a sexually traumatising adolescence. I specifically chose behaviours and personality traits that I had at one point wished to possess in the wake of my own trauma. Eden served as a hybridity of vulnerability and self-criticism. While making sure that my character still fits into the cohesive world that our *Dungeon Master* (the player that ‘directs’ the roleplaying world) designed, I used Eden to misbehave. I have short stories written about her on my *Tumblr* blog, and artworks that I have created of her. Eden was a vessel to observe my trauma, and non-explicitly share it with my friends. We all needed to live with Eden – and I gave her a particularly obnoxious Welsh accent to make sure that she could never be unheard.

⁸⁰ Gygax and Arneson, *Dungeons & Dragons*.

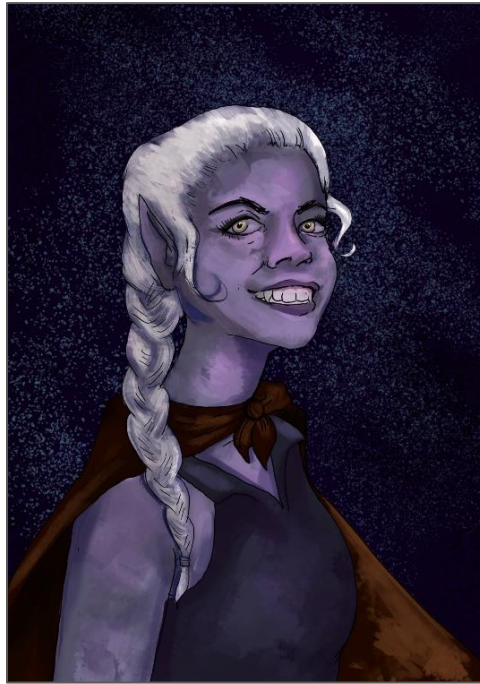


Figure 12 Dodd, Michaela. *Eden*. 2019. Digital art.

In one especially important session of gameplay, Eden had a chance to confront an abuser from her past. My teammates and I revelled in Eden's revenge. I even chronicled it in a short story, as I was particularly happy with how the events played out. My teammates still do not know the dual motivation and importance of that scene. A couple of hours playing a roleplaying game on Sunday moved me closer to a cathartic release of my trauma and frustration than many structured therapy sessions.

While not a *video* game, *Dungeons & Dragons* entirely encapsulates the storytelling potential that video games contain. Exploring the autoethnographic process of playing tabletop roleplaying games (e.g., *Dungeons & Dragons*) yielded valuable information to me. Specifically, the characterisation available in playing tabletop games is transferable to a digital game space. Instead of improvisation, the characterisation would need to derive from writing. I posit that exploring Eden through improvisation aided my idea generation for the writing of ideas for use in video games. I found that a character "voice" is especially rich when it is intertwined with the voice of the author. For example, my final game prototype, *Are You OK?*

is the narrative voice of *myself*, and is directed *to* myself. Again, here I can see space for the added value of indexical relationships – using assets such as real-world diegetic sound to heighten the personal effect of the video game experience.

Video Game Prototypes

The first game I created was a “choose your own adventure” format, where a player could select between two “directions” to take the story. To do this, I utilised the online graph-drawing software *draw.io*.

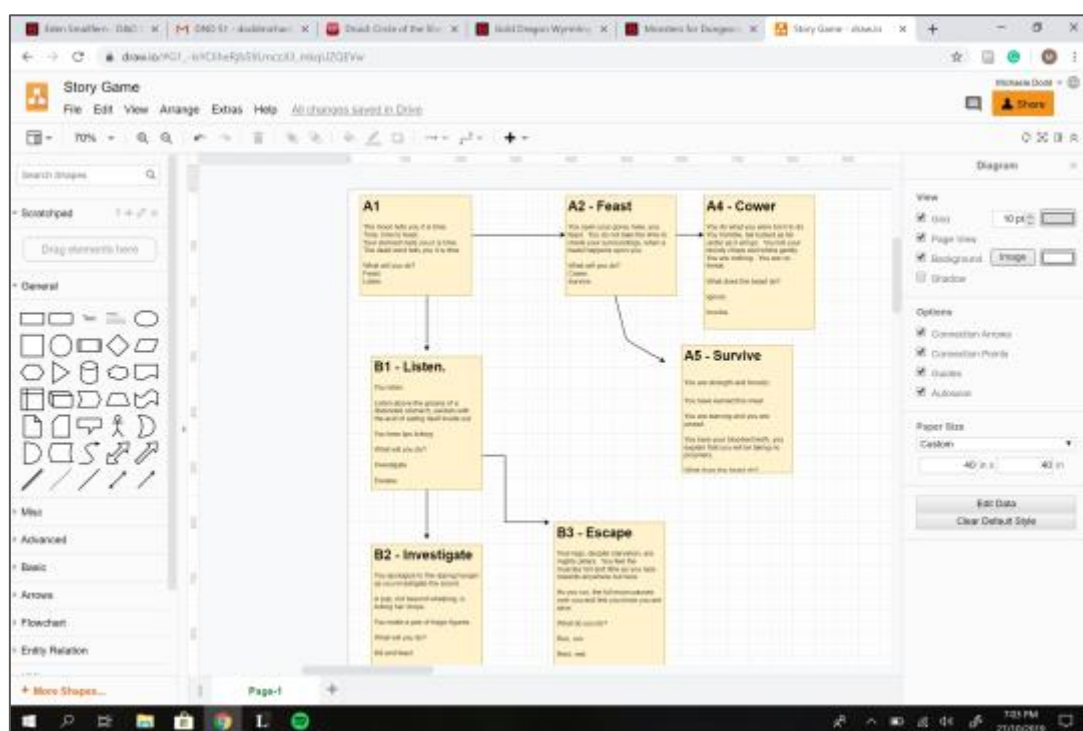


Figure 13 Screenshot of *draw.io*.

*Hunger*⁸¹ was the first of my three main video games. The following two were also produced using the scaffold of understanding that *Udemy* gave me for using the *Unity* game making engine.

There is still a barrier between my technical capabilities and the ideas I have for video games. However, this research identified to me that even with minimal coding knowledge, there are ways to create video games. The process of making is not barred from me, and the space in which to explore is bountiful even with technical limitations.



Figure 14 Screenshot of *Hunger*.

⁸¹ Michaela Dodd, *Hunger*, Point-and-Click, 2019.

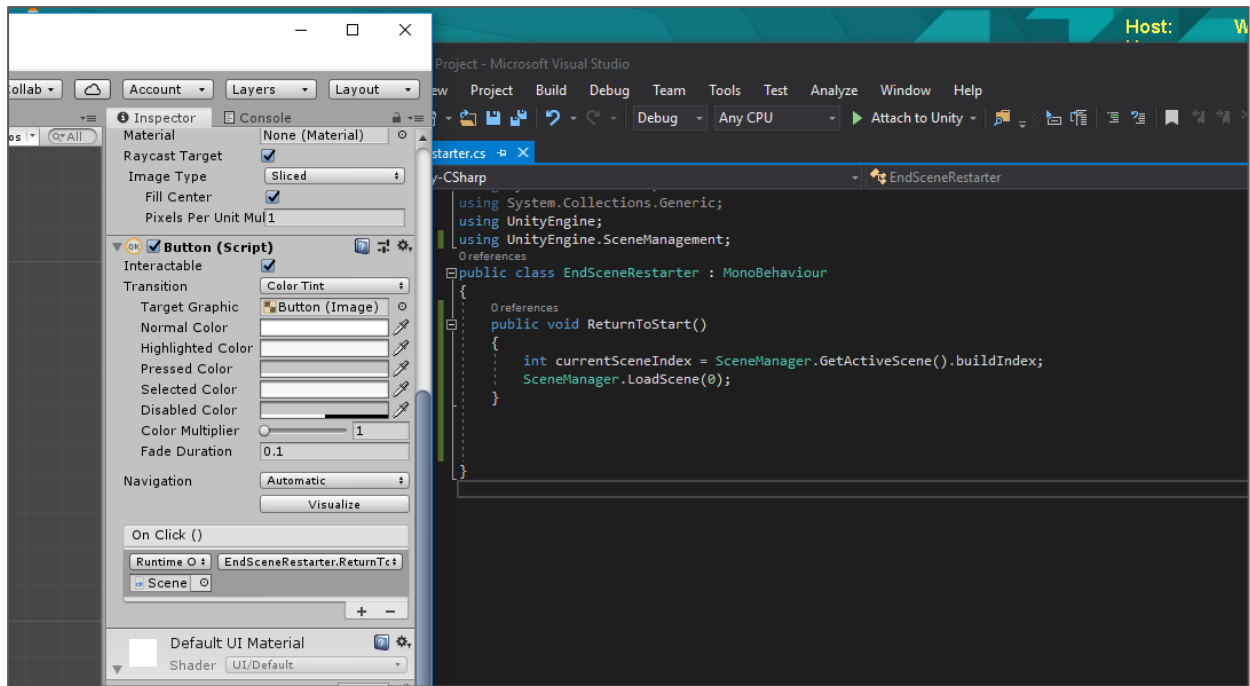


Figure 15 Screenshot of the coding used for *Hunger*.

Hunger was an initial exploration of using relatively simple premises and limited player agency. The player is given two options of actions to follow – as seen above in the options to either “feast” or “listen” (see Figure 14). The narrative aesthetic of *Hunger* was to explore the relationship between predator and prey. Animalistic themes permeate throughout my creative artefacts. Given the nature of trauma, it is easy to feel “hunted” by what has transpired, and I wanted to keep that sense present in my work. Also referring to trauma in an animalistic sense is done to remove the player – myself – from the rawness of trauma. There is no point in creating a game that is too painful to play.

How Many Fucks?, the game referred to earlier, was my second video game prototype. My final video game, titled *Trauma Eater*, is the most significant game prototype. Initially, I had intended this final prototype to be the “closest” prototype to the type of game I would want to finish and publicize – but in retrospect, each of my three prototypes is valuable to me, as tiny and incomplete games. Conceptually, I believe they are all as strong as one another – even though the size and skill needed to produce the concepts vary significantly from game to game.

I can analyse them and understand that they are very raw in terms of technical expertise and playability. Still, I genuinely feel that each encapsulates well a different aspect of coping with my trauma. *Hunger* is absurdist, never making direct reference to the trauma that transpired. *How Many Fucks?* uses a combination of crass humour, satisfying artwork, and an essential self-affirmation of reaching the point of giving “zero fucks”. *Trauma Eater* exists as my own almost-therapy tool, wherein the game itself asks how the player – myself – feels, and aims to “talk me down” from panic should I select options that indicate I am not feeling alright. *Trauma Eater* is explicitly designed for me. The game is accessible for anyone to play, but I produced it with the intention of working through personal trauma.

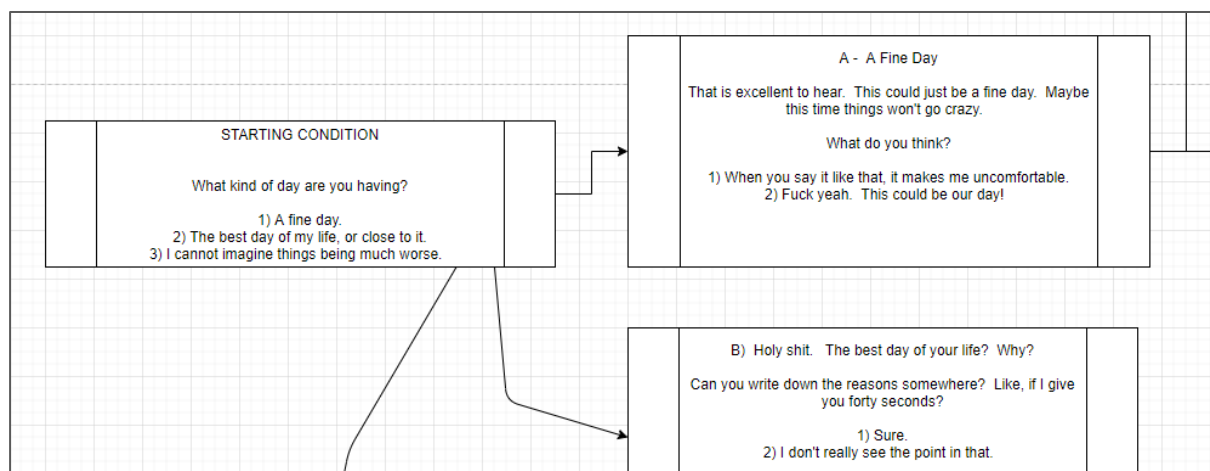


Figure 16 Screenshot from draw.io of *Trauma Eater* script.

What is interesting about *Trauma Eater* is that it holds the least amount of animal symbolism or reference in its text. However, at the same time as conceptualizing *Trauma Eater*, I had refined the artistic style that I want to use in my next video game. Although further video game creation will only occur after the submission of this exegesis, I use this artistic style instead to curate my website, which serves as the primary artefact of my research.



Figure 17 Screenshot of Trauma Eater.

While *Trauma Eater* is the final game artefact that I made in concurrence with my written exegesis, it is not? the last video game that I will make in response to my trauma. As I will further justify in the *Discussion* section of my exegesis, the empowerment that comes from creating in response to trauma is not an avenue of expression that I am finished with.

Website – Trauma Eater: The “Trauma Healing Toolkit”



Figure 18 *traumaeater.squarespace.com* landing page.

Traumaeater.squarespace.com serves as the curatorial space that exhibits all creative artefacts for this exegesis. I consider it an artistically refined area for me to return to in what is hopefully the beginning of a long relationship with academic enquiry and research. *Traumaeater.squarespace.com* also serves as a specific “first point” of enquiry as I reflect upon my exploration of healing through designing. It is not often that one gets to have such a definite beginning.

Discussion

In this penultimate section of my thesis, I evaluate my contribution to the field and identify the limits of my research.

Before this, I wish to take the space to reflect on what creating three video game artefacts, producing art and poetry, and reading through trauma-related narratives has done for me, as a designer and as a trauma survivor.

As a designer:

I have re-established the importance of my own voice in what I create. My hope for this research is to inspire others that their technical skills are not (exclusively) *why* a spectator enjoys the work of a designer. Every single narrative and lived experience that exists, exists differently depending on perspective. My most valuable contributions to the design field may come from self-involved origins. By finding out more about myself, my interests as a designer and what I find enjoyable to *create*, I offer original contributions to design.

As a trauma survivor:

Creating in relation to my trauma has forced me to confront it once again. In creating video game assets, poetry and art, I have been able to harness the negative feelings that I needed to process for my mental health and manufacture creative pieces from the feelings. This creates a multitude of effects: it establishes artistic artefacts for me to reflect upon, to stare at my trauma with a far more palatable lens; it engineers my trauma into a tool of self-improvement, as it spurs my ability to create. Most importantly, it is my sincere hope that the products designed here may resonate with fellow survivors.

Contribution to the Field

My research steps into the under-developed territory of video games and autoethnography. While autobiographical-style video games exist, there is very little literature on the *process* of making such video games. The lack of focus on process means that we ignore the potential for healing. Currently, there is very little research available on what the *making* of games *does* for a designer. Some theorists, such as Kara Stone,⁸² have begun to highlight the importance of creating video games to help with personal mental health, but there is further inquiry to be done. My chosen methodologies and methods allow ample space for the introspection needed for my enquiry. Also, the decision made in the initial stages of my research to focus on many small artefacts as opposed to a final, large prototype resulted in more space to explore a range of ideas without the pressure of negative consequence if an idea failed. All three game prototypes I produced at the end of this research enquiry offer me introspection on who I am as a person, and what I want to achieve as a designer and an academic.

While my games are inherently personal, I posit that there is ample potential in the topic of games focusing on adolescent trauma as a space for self-discovery and empowerment. I hope to see video games of this nature available universally as well as provided in areas where the intended demographic (for example, fellow women who are trauma survivors) can have access to the games as potential tools to facilitate healing.

My supervisor, Ivana, has a fondness for calling the things I create a “trauma healing toolkit”. There is sensibility in this metaphor. My research offers some potential tools to facilitate healing. However, I do not provide a definitive model for applying said tools. Instead, this

⁸² Stone, “Time and Reparative Game Design: Queerness, Disability, and Affect.”

research intends to highlight a space for healing that may otherwise be overlooked and leave the revelation of this space as information to be utilised.

Limitations and Further Research

My research in terms of what video games and assets I can produce is inhibited by my current limitation of technical skill. My research is not appropriate in its scope to provide quantitative information on the effectiveness of my process concerning mental health. Such correlations are difficult to truly identify at the best of times, beyond informed speculation. In deciding not to seek ethical approval for this study to explore the experiences of others, I minimized the scope of my research to focus only on myself and on the interactions I have with the design process. While this allows for more self-reflection, it inhibits understanding how my experiences may or may not help other designers facilitate their healing.

I wish to see my exegesis contributing to the conversation around using video games as therapeutic tools. My specific interest is in the space of female adolescent trauma. The capabilities of video games as vessels for therapeutic experiences deserves further inquiry. I wish for secondary schools a curriculum wherein games are taught alongside literature and film. My research intends to remove some of the stigmas of video games that currently intercept the realm of counselling and therapy, where many therapists' only frame of reference to video games is their addictive, potentially problematic nature.

Conclusion

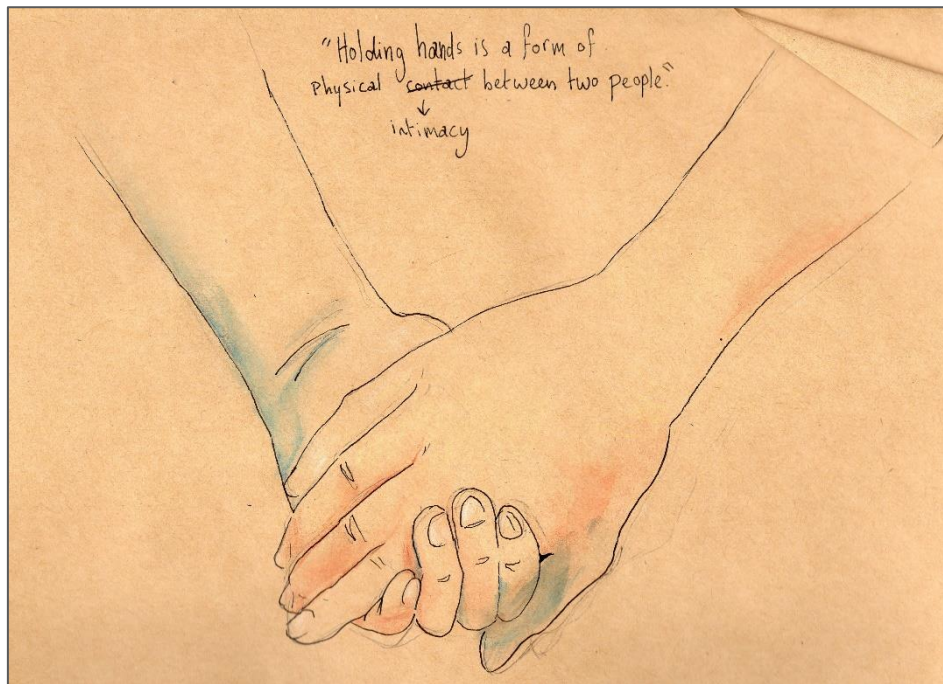


Figure 19 Dodd, Michaela. *Intimacy*. 2020. Pen and paper.

I used my creative abilities and spaces for play to embark on a profoundly self-reflective year. From this, I have discovered new ways to process trauma. My decision to use video game creation as a space for such exploration maintains its importance.

Because I have been driven to keep creating video games, I have had the chance to organise and run monthly meetings for Auckland game designers. At these events, titled *Auckland Indies*, myself and other designers come to a bar to share progress or stories of own video game conceptions. While *Auckland Indies* itself was first conceptualised by my friend and co-worker Elliot Collis, there is importance to the fact that I, as a woman, am running an event that is for game-makers. I am intercepting the misogynistic game space both in my production of video games and in my existence as a woman in the video game field – especially with my role of leadership and organisation.

In the early stages of my research, I designed a manifesto for what I was creating and why. While the process has changed and developed significantly, the declaration remains true.

I end this research as I began it, with the following manifesto:

I design because I care. I research because I am hungry to know, to consume all the resources now that could have helped me a long time ago. If I can use my privileged position as someone creatively and safely supported in a University context to design for the teenager who felt so alone, I have made an impactful contribution.

If I could show myself, aged seventeen, what her trauma will create, how the experience that nearly burned her to the ground will then inspire her to go into postgraduate research and create the type of game that could have helped her: I would have changed something. I would have offered her the silver lining she so desperately needed.

My research is for her and for those like her.



Figure 20 Dodd, Michaela. *Cheetah*. 2020. Digital art.

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