



Paralolla:
an investigation into gender and empowerment in gaming

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Abstract

From *Alice in Wonderland* to *Coraline*: *Paralolla* examines the precedents of the *heterotopia* in fictional media to critically fabricate a digital game-based experience addressing the pressures surrounding gender identity for the young female and non-binary consumer. The aim of this research is to add to critical discourse and practice surrounding the development of video games as alternate explorations of self. The research suggests that the medium of gaming as a platform allows young womxn¹ reprieve from the psycho-social strains of their gender identity. Foucault's concept of heterotopias as a multi-purpose literary tool is key to how *Paralolla's narrative* has been developed for the gaming medium, designed for interactive and non-passive engagement. Furthermore, *Paralolla* seeks to affirm the gaming medium as a potential "classroom" for feminist and gender discourse. The medium allows for the simulation of systems of power which implement the ideas of gender enactment or intersectionality. By constructing *Paralolla* according to theories from third-wave feminists such as Judith Butler and bell hooks, *Paralolla* invites differing gender experiences to empower female and gender non-binary people.

¹ womxn: used as an alternative term of identifying the female gender by some feminists (particularly in the intersectional feminist movement). The intention of use in this thesis is to be inclusive of not only cis-gender and trans women, but femme/feminine-identifying genderqueer and the gender non-binary.

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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 acknowledgements), 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: Laura Bell

Acknowledgements

Garling Wu: an award-winning composer and sound artist. “Her projects include dance and electronics, sound installation, acousmatic pieces and live-performance. Using these forms she explores narrative and story-telling, finding value in weaving together referential and imagined sound worlds” (garlingwu.com, accessed 2/10/20). Garling completed her masters thesis on Foucault’s concept of ‘heterotopias’ to explore the limits of spatial thinking within electroacoustic music. “By understanding the various physical, mental and social limits of space, we can begin to appreciate how the language of space can be used to create meaning and insight within our works” (Wu, 2019). Garling’s expertise in the theories of the heterotopia suited the implementations of the heteretopia in the project of *Paralolla*. Any sound featured in *Paralolla* (unless otherwise stated) has been wonderfully fabricated by Garling in careful consideration of the intentions of the research project.

I would also like to acknowledge the womxn who inspire me to dream, and who have shown me the incredible strength in love and sisterhood:

Rachel, Janine, Garling, Gemma, Emma, Natasha, Courtney, Ricci, Micky, Symmer and of course, my māmā.

Introduction

And woman suffers, while the warrior snarls within her. I am one such woman.

Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, *mana wahine maori* (1991)

Reflecting on my childhood, I realise I have always struggled with my identity. I liked Barbie dolls until I was ridiculed for being ‘a girl’. Then I was called a ‘tom-boy’, and later as a queer adolescent, a ‘dyke’ (Green, 2020). Eventually, before my third year of my BA began, I was told I looked “too girly” to be in game development. I had allowed society to dictate who I was by listening to these words, and continuously changed myself according to an imaginary ideal. In my academic studies I learned of Judith Butler and the notion that ‘gender is performative’ and found empowerment in embracing both the feminine and masculine within myself. The goal in my practice is to gift this empowerment to other young womxn, allowing them to challenge gender norms and shape their own identities.

Through the medium of the video game I have designed a Foucault-esque heterotopic space that reflects one world where “gender” is dictated and another parallel world where “gender” is diverse. In *Paralolla*, gender and gendered traits are substituted with those of animals. Within this gaming narrative, the main characters are creatures called Triflings. Young ‘Trifling’ girls are required to undergo horrific ceremonies to remove body parts such as horns (the “Abscission” ceremony) as they are seen as unfitting (too violent, too masculine). The removal of their horns result in them being stripped of their power. The main character, Lolla, is separated from her best friend Ishani while trying to escape the ceremony. She falls into an alternate world where diversity amongst the Trifling is instead celebrated and discovers the strength in her ‘masculinity’ (her horns). In order to save Ishani, Lolla must find a way back to her own reality and put an end to the traditions of gender-dictatorship, represented in the ‘Abscission’ ceremony. This narrative is intended to reflect the two conflicting positions of gender as binary, and gender as a spectrum. My understanding is that only in the latter can those of us connected to both our feminine and masculine selves, such as Lolla, find liberation and freedom to authentically self-express.

Paralolla seeks to allow young womxn (Vibes, 2018) empowerment within their gender, through critical and deliberate game design. Informed by feminist scholars and theorists, the project takes into consideration the viewpoints of Judith Butler and her discussions surrounding gender as a performance compelled and enforced by historical social practice (Butler, 2011), while also considering practice-led and narrative methodologies within the area of game design to best implement the practice of the research as a tool for female and non-binary empowerment.

Heterotopias

Paralolla is largely concerned with the concept of the *heterotopia*, a term coined by Michel Foucault, a French philosopher most associated with structuralist and post-structuralist movements. Foucault identifies two forms of heterotopias, or “other” spaces, in a 1967 lecture presented at the University of Tunis, where he lived amongst the anti-government and pro-Palestine riots of that year. It is worthwhile to note that the philosopher’s primary reason for relocating there was to be near his partner, Daniel Defert, who was posted in Tunis while undergoing compulsory national service. Foucault refers to military services as a heterotopia of crisis in his lecture, suggesting that these environments may have been influential circumstances in devising or developing on his theory of *the heterotopia*. The two forms of heterotopia that Foucault identifies are those of crisis and deviancy respectively. The former is described as places considered privileged, sacred or forbidden, while the latter is defined as grounds which individuals who do not conform to what is considered ‘the norm’ are placed. The transcript of this lecture was eventually released into the public domain in 1984 for an exhibition in Berlin shortly before Foucault’s death. This manuscript, entitled “*Des Espaces Autres*”, or “*Of Other Spaces*,” (Foucault, 1986) was not reviewed by Foucault himself and thus is not considered a part of the official corpus of his work. However, heterotopia as a term is often referred to in the contexts of postmodern, post-structuralist² theoretical discussion regarding place, and in relation to worlds created in film and architecture.

Paralolla aligns itself within the context of Foucault’s heterotopia, developing on specific work of theorists such as Cristina Ferrerira Laterza. Laterza penned an in-depth analysis of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (2009) in the contexts of utopia and Foucault’s heterotopia (Laterza, 1999). Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* offers an existing precedent of an “other world” narrative featuring a young female protagonist. It features traits aligned with Foucault’s theory of the *heterotopia*. The manic grin of the Cheshire Cat, the “fabulous” animals like the White Rabbit and March Hare, and the nonsensical shifts of proportion Alice undergoes in Wonderland are an alteration of an “order” between things. Laterza explains: “... [the] break of this order would be like the break of the correct relationship between parts and whole, and that is what Foucault calls heterotopia” (ibid., 46). Laterza’s examination of Carroll’s implementations of heterotopia within *Alice* influences *Paralolla*’s own attempts at manipulating order to construct heterotopias set by gender. Furthermore, Laterza’s research clarifies

² postmodern, post-structuralist: Late 20th century movements which are characterised by an acute awareness to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining physical power. These movements challenge modernism and structuralism and consider the relationships between power and knowledge to shape subjectivity and identity. Poststructuralist theorists are critical of systems of thought that make claims to uncover truth, such as religion or certain sciences, while postmodernism intends to “undermine the grand narratives of [...] domination including capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, and heteronormativity.” Postmodernism and post-structuralism expose contradictions within these grand narratives. They suggest means to resist and refuse domination.

how Michel Foucault's defining principles of the spatial concept may be utilised in fantasy fiction crafted toward an audience of young womxn.

This process, according to Lisa K. Perdiago (2014), is refined and modernised in the adaption of Neil Gaiman's novel to animated film *Coraline* (Selick, 2009). Perdiago explains that *Coraline* manipulates familiar themes of identity and self-discovery. Gaiman does this by experimenting with ideas of liminality and blurring the lines between author and reader. According to Perdiago, the implementation of a heterotopic narrative is considered highly immersive to the young female consumer, even allowing her to "be seen as a double to Coraline, crossing boundaries with the character to enter the liminal space that the novel represents" (Perdiago, 2014, 104). This is an aspect of the heterotopic narrative which *Paralolla* also hopes to accomplish outside of a text-based form; and rather, within the medium of the *video game*. Unfortunately, gaming is a medium sometimes perceived as being valueless or detrimental to the psychosocial growth of children and adolescents.

Behavioural studies' scholars Christopher John Ferguson and Cheryl K. Olson note that the acceptance of catharsis gained from digital games is often "met with hostility in much of the scholarly community, with most applicable discussions focused on aggression rather than on a general reduction of stress or sadness" (Ferguson and Olson, 2013). I intend to situate my research in opposition to these predispositions, aligning *Paralolla* with Ferguson and Olson, or even Jordan Shapiro, author of "*The New Childhood*" (2018) who argue that the child's or adolescent's immersion into these digital spaces will 'help prepare them for the future'. According to Shapiro, "digital tools act like a bridge between individual and common experiences [...] they help us to mediate our relationship with the world around us. They ease the strain between *inner and outer realities*. They do this exceptionally well." (ibid., chapter 6).

Ferguson and Olson's investigation of existing literature regarding children's motivations for using digital games, and the motivations of children with psychosocial problems, much like *Paralolla*, aims to further the trend towards a more sophisticated and nuanced contemplation of the video game medium. Ferguson and Olsen often refer to gaming as an "important part of youth entertainment and socialising." (Ferguson & Olsen, 2013, 163).

A Feminist theoretical engagement with Heterotopias

Influenced by the works of Michel Foucault, gender studies theorist Judith Butler acknowledges that juridical systems of power *produce* the subjects they subsequently come to represent³. She explains that, “...the subjects regulated by such structures are, by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures.” (Butler, 2011, 40). This, according to Butler, means that “the juridical formation of language and politics that represents women as “the subject” of feminism is itself a discursive formation and effect of a given version of representational politics.” (ibid.) Butler understood that the ‘category of “women”’, the subject of feminism, “is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought.” (ibid, 2). Her philosophies sought a subversive performance of the gender norms that govern the production of gender identity.

Informed by the analysis of Butler’s position, I conceptualised the two differing spaces in *Paralolla*. The first space is Lolla’s world which adheres to a juridical system of power, and the “other” world in which it does not exist. These worlds in *Paralolla*, through creating a space that parallels Butler’s concepts, hopes to suggest the potential freedom of gender-expression and identity in the digital “other worlds” available to the young womxn within games. In doing so, I hope to provide an example that might encourage a new wave of game design which considers the psycho-social of the young womxn amidst her gender discovery, while also acknowledging the value of the medium in feminist spaces. As Samantha Allen so succinctly stated in her essay titled ‘Video Games as a Feminist Pedagogy.’ “Put simply: video games belong in feminist classrooms.” (Allen, 2014, 62).

This quote from her essay illustrates her position on the value of the video game as a teaching tool. Allen used the video game *Halo* (Bungie, 2001) in her classroom to allow her students better understanding of intersectional oppression. Allen explains, “Video games not only helped my students understand feminist and queer concepts, they altered the dynamics of my classroom in a distinctly feminist way. And, because video games highlight the interactivity of systems, they can help students develop the critical thinking skills necessary to understand the operation of systems of oppression.” (Allen, 2014, 62).

In “*Feminism is for Everybody*” bell hooks labels the ideological foundation of these forms of oppression as *Western metaphysical dualism* – the assumption that the world can always be understood by binary categories; that there is an inferior and a superior, a good and a bad, or a masculine and a feminine (hooks, 2015). It

³ juridical systems of power: The judicial system is the system of courts that interprets and applies the law in the name of the state. Juridical systems of power, or *juridical* power, under Foucault and Butler definitions, is sovereign power which relies on the law in negative terms – in prohibition; in “rejection, exclusion, refusal, blockage, concealment, or mask”. (Foucault, 1976, 83).

is through academic contexts that hooks learned dissemination of feminist thought and non-biased scholarship about gender and about women. It is through academic contexts that I have the opportunity to further explore and articulate how feminist thought might lessen the degree to which metaphysical dualism holds dominion over us. hooks acknowledges the great strides intersectional, loving feminism has already made for womxn, and calls for a mass-based movement which offers feminist education to everyone – inclusive of men and particularly, children.

bell hooks proposes; “Literature that helps inform masses of people, that helps understand feminist thinking and feminist politics, needs to be written in a range of styles and formats. We need work that is especially geared towards youth culture.” (hooks, 2015, 22 – 23). According to hooks, there is also rational concern that the discontinuation of feminist theory and practice would risk the renunciation of the rights the movement has secured – with reproductive rights and the rights to govern our own bodies at the forefront of her worry. “Young females who have always had access to effective contraception – who have never witnessed the tragedies caused by illegal abortions – have no firsthand experience of the powerlessness and vulnerability to exploitation that will always be the outcome if females do not have reproductive rights.” (ibid. 29). It is hooks theory that renewed feminist movement will prioritize bodily autonomy over any other issue.

Paralolla, likewise, fixates on this notion of body autonomy to express the pathological, life-threatening aspects of appearance obsession surrounding gender conformity. The ‘Abscission’, the coming of age ceremony that involves the removing of young female Triflings appendages, is standard in the world of the Trifling. The Abscission ceremony is set and regulated by an equivalent metaphysical dualism in the digital world of *Paralolla*. This dictates which appendages Trifling should keep, and which should be severed. This aligns with hook’s theories of a ‘decolonized feminist perspective’ – linking an abstraction of female circumcision (an issue more seen in Africa or the Middle East) to culture-imposed beauty ideals. By doing so, we ensure “Western imperialism is not reinscribed and feminism cannot be appropriated by transnational capitalism as yet another luxury product from the West women in other cultures must fight to have the right to consume.” (ibid. 47). *Paralolla* acknowledges the struggles which feminism resists on a global scale, addressing issues of body autonomy and subordination in Lolla’s native world while embedding values of intersectionality and love into the heterotopia. As hooks states, “love acts to transform domination.” (ibid. 103). It is this love experienced in the heterotopia that sees Lolla unlearn the metaphysical dualism that had founded her identity. Breaking free from the domination of a binary mode of thinking shows Lolla her true strengths; she is empowered. Thus, through thinking of the implementation of the heterotopia in *Paralolla* as a “classroom”, it is hoped that it becomes a setting for feminist and gender discourse and a tool for empowerment for young womxn.

Female representation in Paralolla

Paralolla largely engages the theories of bell hooks to ensure an inclusive, mass-based model of alternative explorations of gender. In alignment with Samantha Allen's discourse on the recognition of feminist pedagogy potentials in gaming and the shared preceding work of Judith Butler regarding structures of power and gender identity, *Paralolla* takes a uniquely feminist approach to exploring themes of gender and power constructs.

As part of this positioning, it is important to consider the context of female characters of mainstream gaming through a radical feminist critique of hyper-sexualized female protagonists such as Lara Croft. Despite Lara Croft's notoriety as a strong, independent female character, Bryce Dumas would still describe her character as a "fighting fucktoy" (Dumas, 2016). Samus in *Metroid* (1986), Yuna in *Final Fantasy X* (2002), and April Ryan in *The Longest Journey* (1999) are considered by James DeRosa as 'almosts', strong female protagonists who would be exceptions to the problematic form women must fill in media, if not for the designer's attempts at keeping them appealing to the 'male gaze' (DeRosa, 2009). *Samus*, for example, is only revealed to be a female if the game is completed in under three hours, and is shown to be a woman only by the aesthetic change from full-body armour to a hot pink bodysuit, or bikini if the game is completed in under an hour. In a 2016 *Youtube* playthrough by user 'A 90s Kid', the player achieves this only to display how the representation of women in games often exists primarily for male pleasure. As Samus' body lights up, signaling the change, the player and a spectator remark: "come on, show us the goods lady!" and "Yes! We did get her disrobed." (A 90's Kid, 2016, 20:20 – 20:35) The player has brought peace to the imagined universe of *Metroid*, but it is the pixelized undressing of Samus which is considered both the motive and reward for play.

Though existing feminist scholarship within the field of gaming would suggest that the medium is an "ideal companion for feminist theories of patriarchy, oppression, racism and intersectionality" (Allen, 2014, 71– 72) , all of which require a systemic understanding of the social world, I believe a more abstracted form of representation would be better received by the audience I am creating the game for: young females between the ages of 12 – 25. I have aimed to achieve this by centering the narrative around conflict with traits that parallel the conflict in the physical aspects of masculine/feminine within all young women and non-binary. By doing this I can evade the sexualisation of game characters while considering and embedding feminist values. By implementing themes of intersectionality and systems of oppression into the creation of *Paralolla*, I aim to provide an experience that would allow a young womxn to experience a sense of empowerment in terms of her gender identity.

Narrative in *Parallola*

Further feminist theory, particularly the works of Laura Mulvey (1989) help us to understand Hollywood Cinema/traditional *narrative* in film and its male-dominated viewpoints (referred to as "phallogentrism") and how the developing medium of video games may be situated at a similar crossroads. Using Freudian and other psycho-analytics, Laura Mulvey speaks on scopophilia, the voyeurism in looking at another as an erotic object, and the 'ego libido' – both which, according to Mulvey, "pursue aims in indifference to perceptual reality, and motivate eroticised phantasmagoria⁴ that affect the subject's perception of the world to make a mockery of empirical objectivity." Both mechanisms reflect the desire of men.

In a summary of this essay (2017) Farva Rivzi states; "According to Mulvey, the female cinematic figure is a paradoxical one. She combines attraction with the playing on deep fears of castration. The male subconscious has two ways of escaping his fear of castration. One is the demystification of the female figure in the dismantling of her mysteries (in films: the female figure is punished or saved by the male figure). The other way to escape fear of being castrated by the woman is through the fetishization of her (for instance as the glamorous, unobtainable star)." (Rivzi, 2017, para. 7). Rivzi goes on to argue that films, and by extension in this case, games, might aid the resolving the tension of both being attracted to and fearing female characters, for primarily male viewers.

James DeRosa's 2009 article titled "Laura Mulvey, the Male Gaze, and Video Games" subjectively reflects on the writings of Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema". DeRosa states, "In her essay she uses strong Freudian psychoanalytical correlation to make her argument that male-dominated viewpoints are deeply entangled with the visual and anthropomorphic components of film storytelling and with the capitalist necessity of high production values. [...] With video games, we're at a similar crossroads [...] its developmental landscape is currently steeped in heterosexual, male perspectives." (DeRosa, 2009, 1). This is still the dominant gaming landscape I explicitly seek to counteract in this research.

By considering the rationale behind the misrepresentation of womxn in traditional narratives through Mulvey's work and remaining mindful of how exposure to such misrepresentation might harm the self-efficacy of such individuals, *Parallola* aims to offer narratives which incorporate feminist and gender non-binary themes.

⁴ phantasmagoria: a sequence of real or imaginary images like that seen in a dream (definition by Oxford Languages via *Google*).

Methodologies

Paralolla was initialised through the creative practices of independent game development and an intuitive approach to design surrounding themes of feminism and gender. This intuition has been informed by my lived experiences and further informed by my research into post-structuralist, intersectional feminist theory and notions of *the heterotopia*. The conceptualisations of art direction and narrative design were inspired by games which push beyond the outdated notion that games must cater to a stereotypically male audience, such as *Gris* (2018) or *Fran Bow* (2015), which focus on grief and mental illness respectively to allow reprieve from the suffering of such, as *Paralolla* does for alternative gender explorations. These concepts were then formed through sketching and written drafts of the narrative, constantly reworked and redefined in response to the ideas of which the research would introduce or extend (a further discussion of this process will be present in the *discussion of practice* sector of this exegesis). These are common methods, within art and design practices. What is particular to my approach with *Paralolla* though is my commitment to the social themes and values that *Paralolla* incorporates. This approach adheres closely to the method outlined in the paper ‘A Game Design Methodology to Incorporate Social Activist Themes’ by Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum (2007), which helped to set forth the particular principles of *Paralolla* as *design aspirations*.

Flanagan and Nissenbaum discuss the challenges of designing digital games for social themes, which is worth quoting at length:

There is a will, not only among concerned observers but also those who play and create games, that existing games should be enhanced and diversified, or rather, that games should at least be developed in a way that they could include ethical ideals – or *human values*. Accordingly, our work urges designers and producers to include values as the set of criteria by which the quality of a given technology is judged, to strive actively for a world whose technologies are not only effective, efficient, safe, attractive, easy to use, and so forth, but that promote the values to which the surrounding societies and cultures subscribe.” (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2007, 181).

In their efforts Flanagan and Nissenbaum are able to craft a set of articulated methodologies that can be used to address human themes in game design and foster the integration of values into the design practice. They introduce the Values at Play (VAP) approach comprising of three “constitutive” and iterative activities: Discovery, Translation, and Verification. In the paper, each activity is discussed, but can be defined as follows:

Discovery: in which designers “discover” and identify values relevant to the project. The VAP method requires designer(s) to create a preliminary checklist of values in order to initiate an inquiry into the sources of values in a given project, and to prioritize them in the design process.

Translation: in which designers “translate” value considerations into architecture and features into game iterations. Compromising of three “sub-activities”, operationalization, implementation, and resolving value-conflicts, translation is the act of embodying and expressing values in systems design.

Verification: in which designers appraise whether and to what extent they have successfully embedded the target values in a given system.

By engaging in such an approach alongside a focus and understanding of feminist theory and my lived experience of intersectional feminism, the core values of *Paralolla* continue to be fostered. The VAP methodology also allows us to identify these values as follows: gender identity and diversity, intersectionality, and empowerment. This is only one of many expositions regarding the use of digital spaces as tools to help better mediate the world around us. *Paralolla* affirms and seeks to further this scholarship and offer gender empowering content by remaining critical and highly considerate of feminist theory and practice-led game design methodologies. Central to my fabrication process is to ensure the core values of the game are upheld and remain integral to the design process.

Discussion of Practice

The creation of *Paralolla* involved critical concepts that primarily considered the areas of feminist pedagogy, and Foucault's theories of the heterotopia. These have been evaluated as relevant to the intention of this thesis and discussed earlier in this exegesis. As a project developed within the limited context of Masters research, I present a *section* of the game, rather than the entire game, for the practical component of this research. This section demonstrates the essence of my thesis: a study of gender and video games that aims to soothe and empower the psychosocial of the young womxn gamer through the implementations of the heterotopia.

To achieve that aim, the conceptual elements of the narrative were considered on a larger scale. As I intend that *Paralolla* will be pursued beyond what can be achieved in the timeframe of the first phase of this research, thought was given to the narrative beyond the point of the practical component to this thesis. This ideal includes further exploration of both the "real" and "heterotopia" environments implemented in the game to disassemble abstract operations of systems of oppression, and compare to interactivity of those systems (Lolla, like *Alice* or *Coraline* falling through to a *Wonderland* or an *other world*), to allow abstract displays that deepen understanding of those systems, or traits of those systems, in *our* native realities.

The designs of Lolla and the other trifling are amalgamations –not of human characteristics that we define as masculine and feminine, but instead, traits that are animalistic. This is meant to suggest that Lolla (us, the player) are not made of a collection of traits to which we 'fit', such as in terms of a binary gender of 'boy' or 'girl', but that our traits are part of a much wider spectrum. As Judith Butler might, *Paralolla* critiques the 'category of women' by challenging the gender binary and westernised dualistic modes of thought. Like us, the Trifling are truly scattered amongst this spectrum but herded and enforced towards a binary system: which does not work for them, and often harms them. Lolla herself is a simplification of this perceived spectrum in which her horns that sit prominently on her head are seen as unnecessary. In *Paralolla*, this is a trait she is judged as not needing as it opposes (physically; to a culture-enforced beauty ideal) which side of the binary system she is expected to exist. Lolla loses autonomy of her own body due to the systems of oppression that exist in her native reality.

The ceremony removing appendages is an exaggeration of an idea akin to something we are being more often exposed to in modern society; people who invest in the physical ideals of and add to or remove parts of themselves to better conform to the appearances of a binary system of gender. Lolla's native reality takes its own version of this as a cultural tradition or law. In Samantha Allen's discourse she notes that "because games are "models of real and imagined systems" that can help students to "critique the systems we live in"[...]" *Paralolla* hopes to allow a more playful approach

to understanding a bizarre form of oppression from a binary system of gender. (Allen, 2014, 67-71).

The demo for Paralolla begins on (the protagonists) Lolla's 13th birthday, and takes place within a boarding house.



Figure 1: Breakdown of Paralolla - Page 1

Lolla and the other young 'girls' of the school are small creatures and monsters with amalgamations of animal, beast and humanoid traits referred to as 'Triflings'.



Figure 2: Breakdown of Paralolla - Page 2

The triflings are policed by the 'matrons' who are 4-6 times the height of Trifling and although they are many they are eerily identical.



These matrons follow ancient guidelines and societal laws that are undisclosed to Trifling, but have been set by an unseen society called 'The All'.

Figure 3: Breakdown of Paralolla - Page 3

As a symbol of gratitude, a traditional ceremony was crafted in which the Trifling remove their "unnecessary" limbs/appendages.



This ceremony is glorified by the matrons and Trifling, and takes place on a Trifling's 13th birthday.

Figure 4: Breakdown of Paralolla - Page 4



Figure 5: A Trifling of the Heterotopia

[Image left of a trifling living in the world through the handheld game system: the creatures and world of the heterotopia in *Paralolla* have a slightly more magical, fairy-like mix of features].

This is why *Paralolla* includes theories of the heterotopia. The *Wonderland*-esque, or shape-shifting logics of the game twists these systems upside down. The Trifling that exist in this foreign reality are not restricted by a binary system that governs their individuality: the variety of traits available to these Trifling have evolved, and as such they are self-empowered. In fact, it is Lolla who has gone from being more free than the others in her school in her own reality (due to her rebellious nature) to becoming the most restrained. Lolla has never had free access to the use of her horns and must learn to use the natural abilities she was forced to suppress.

The environments of the *other world* shift to a more vibrant version of it's former self, with more natural features merging into man-made structure. This reflects the interactivity and harmony between two "opposing" systems.

[Right: Lolla, Ishani and a matron in the halls. Below: the same halls but in the heterotopia].



The heterotopia is very organic in nature. Still indoors and playing with distinctive features of Lolla's school, the heterotopia suggests a more wild, living version of Lolla's reality.

Lolla finds it difficult to adjust to the heterotopia, endowed with more strength, speed, and buoyancy in her step.



She is now able to charge through objects, reach higher platforms, and communicate with Ishani via the handheld device.

channel always open unless signal is jammed
e.g. press X to talk to Ishani

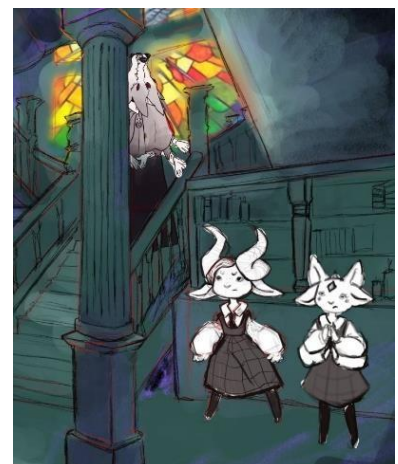


Figure 6: Lolla, Ishani and a matron in the boarding school halls.

Figure 7: Breakdown of *Paralolla* - Page 10 Figure 8: Breakdown of *Paralolla* - Page 11

The featured segment

Paralolla, the game segment included in this thesis involves a five to ten minute playable experience that considered the most relevant points of narrative to the project's intention – the values discovered using the VAP iterative method of designing (Flanagan & Nissenbaum). The narrative can be summarized as follows:

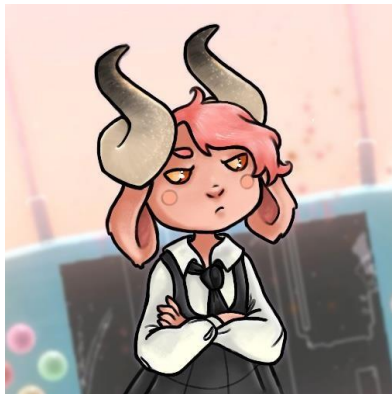


Figure 9: Lolla arms crossed.

Lolla (pictured left), a small, fuzzy pink Trifling, resembling an anthropomorphised rabbit or goat, wakes in her dormitory to find the bed beside her is empty. Leaving her bedroom, Lolla roams the boarding school hall seeking Ishani, asking any other students her best friends' whereabouts. The other students are able to inform the player, through their interactions with Lolla, that Ishani is near the ceremonial theatre, and that there is a general excitement shared amongst them regarding Lolla and Ishani's shared ceremony that is to take place later on that morning.



Figure 10: Lolla and Ishani's dorm room.



Figure 11: Lolla on her bed in the shared dorm.

[Images above: Lolla and Ishani's dormitory.] Unable to express individual identity, the room is barren of decoration or clothing aside from their school uniform. Tally marks can be seen that have been carved into the wall. These are an indication of Lolla's rebellious disposition. Even before understanding the true horrors of her reality, she feels imprisoned by it and has a tendency to "act out" (eg. drawing on walls).

At the beginning of the demo, as Lolla moves about the boarding house, she is able to interact with fellow students, who are excited on her behalf for her "unwounding".



Once Lolla reaches Ishani, it is



revealed that Lolla intends to flee from the ceremony, having received an anonymous message. This is revealed to the player as Lolla convinces Ishani to come with her.



Figures 12 and 13: Breakdown of Paralolla – Page 5, Page 6

Ishani, Lolla's gentle best friend, has four arms and four ears, but it is her third eye which will be Abscised. Her third eye gives her premonitions of the end-times of the Abscission ceremonial traditions. Having already shared her knowledge with Lolla within the narrative of the game but outside of the playable experience, the two finalise their thoughts and settle their nerves before navigating the school halls, seeking somewhere to hide outside of the peripherals of roaming matrons. Here, it is evident of Lolla and Ishani's natural inclination to position themselves outside the (parallel) ideals of the gender binary and metaphysical dualism. Lolla and Ishani display a manner of resistance to the social systems of their world which does not coincide with the attitudes of the other students. Their characterization reflects bell hooks' definition of queerness; "as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live" (hooks, 2014).

This scene gives a slow introduction to the game mechanics (Lolla wandering through environments, interacting informally with other students) before flooding the game with lore to help the player understand the social systems of Lolla's world. It stresses the fear of the *matrons*, those who uphold the binary laws regarding Triflings. The matrons are tall, dark creatures with four wolf faces sewn together to make a head. They are in actuality grown Trifling who have undergone means to adhere to the ideals and standards set for them (in a finished version of *Paralolla* the jaws of the wolves would open to reveal this) and have then taken roles which continue to perpetuate those standards. The matrons are meant as a critique of the neo-colonial paternalism seen in feminism that is *non*-intersectional.

In “*Feminism is for everybody*” bell hooks discusses how this slogan has been enacted by white/Western women. She writes:

“They declared themselves liberated and therefore in a position to liberate their less fortunate sisters, especially those in the “third world” [...] so that only conservative/liberal white women would be the authentic representatives of feminism [...] in truth, their hegemonic takeover of feminist rhetoric about equality has helped mask their allegiance to the ruling classes within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.” (hooks, 2015, 45).

Lolla and Ishani must then make their way through the school, avoiding the matrons by staying out of their sight as they patrol the corridors, seeking Lolla.



Figure 14: Breakdown of Paralolla - Page 7

The dumbwaiter takes them up to an off-limits storage room which displays a collection of removed appendages. Lolla and Ishani explore the room separately.



Here, the player may interact with the objects of the room to gain insight to world lore and Lolla's personality.

Figure 15: Breakdown of Paralolla - Page 8

The matrons in *Paralolla* are monastic; they are the ruling classes in hooks terms. They are reminiscent of nuns – women who have turned to monastic traditions without the presence of men – acknowledging the role womxn themselves may play in maintaining and perpetuating sexism or prejudice defined through the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. If the feminist discourse in *Paralolla* were to exclude such acknowledgement, I think that ideas underpinning the game would miss an important component of this conversation, that “the extent to which women (with men) in this society accept and perpetuate the idea that it is acceptable for a dominant group to maintain power over the dominated by using coercive force. It allows us to overlook or ignore the extent to which women exert coercive authority over others or act violently.” (ibid. 63). Therefore, Lolla's quest becomes one which seeks to end the culture of domination where everyone is socialised to see violence – the ‘Abscission ceremony’ – as an acceptable means of control.

Lolla discovers a locked chest, and the player must use the previously found Key, or backtrack to find it.



Inside is a handheld gaming device which powers on and immediately pulls Lolla into a new world.

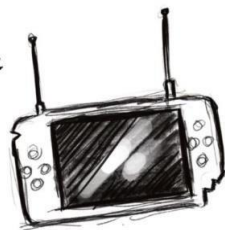
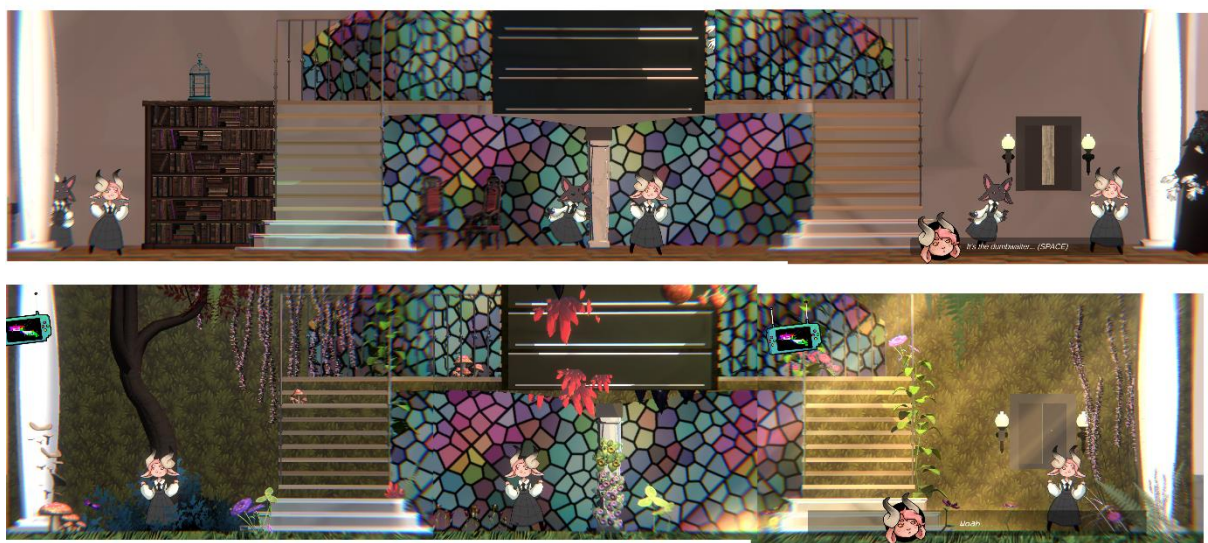


Figure 16: Breakdown of Paralolla - Page 9

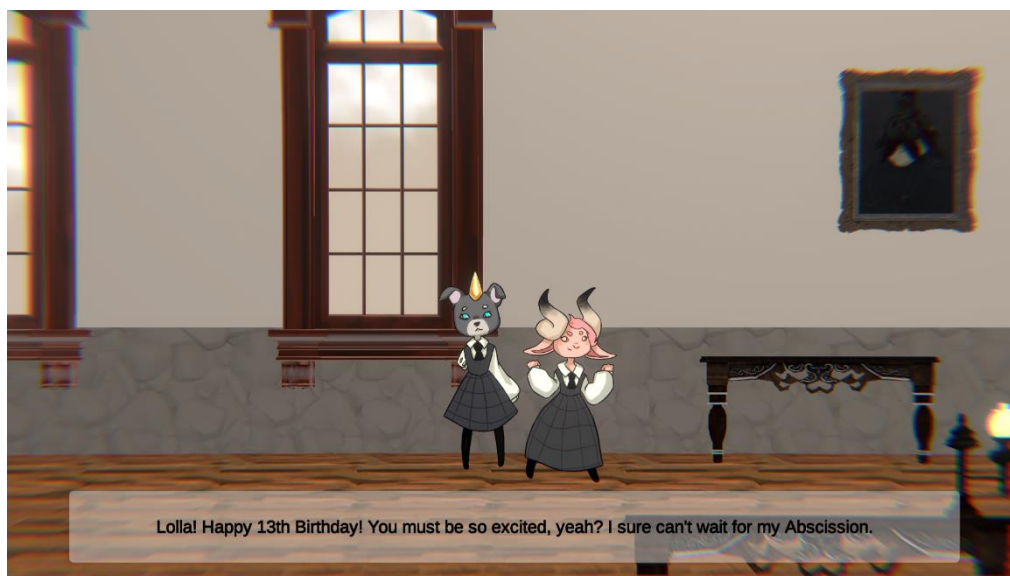
Making a close escape through a dumbwaiter in the kitchen of the boarding school, Lolla and Ishani are lifted into a room much gloomier than the dull beige and off-whites of the school corridors. They are given insight into the underlying evil, oppressive nature of the binary that governs their society, discovering a room filled with severed appendages (including the horn of Lolla's elder sister whom she hasn't seen in years, and who is the matron revealed as Trifling in the full version of the game) and confiscated items. One of these items is a strange locked chest, prompting the girls to separate in search of a key. Lolla finds the key and is able to open the chest. Inside is the handheld console which acts as the malfunctioning portal between their reality and the seemingly simulated one of the heterotopia. Lolla is immediately pulled through this portal.

Alone in the heterotopia, Lolla wanders a similar path to that she did in the beginning of the playable demo: the physical structure of the world is the same, but embellished and flourished with amalgamations of man-made, natural and unnatural characteristics: flora can grow from walls and ceilings and rain is able to rise upwards. It is earth, space, the undersea all at once. The world of the heterotopia, like the Trifling who inhabit it, is unrestricted in its growth. This is attributed to the lack of dominance in the culture here – instead, there is a prevalence of love.



Screenshot 1: Comparisons of the Stairways in Lolla's native reality (top) and the heterotopia.

The heterotopia featured in *Paralolla* was critically fabricated to oppose the culture of domination allowed through westernized metaphysical dualism and white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Thus it considers bell hooks call, through a spirit of love towards feminist activism: “When we accept that true love is rooted in recognition and acceptance, that love combines acknowledgement, care, responsibility, commitment, and knowledge, we understand there can be no love without justice. With that awareness comes the understanding that love has the power to transform us, giving us the strength to oppose domination. To choose feminist politics, then, is a choice to love.” (hooks, 2015, 104).



Screenshot 2, 3: Transformation of the School Hall in the heterotopia.

Lolla encounters this culture of acceptance and love within the society of the Trifling who reside within the heterotopia once the player has navigated her to the ceremonial hall once more. Here, the Trifling have gathered not to celebrate the severing of something in order to fulfil a societally enforced standard of identity, but to celebrate mutuality. The heterotopic Trifling exist in a world of where it is possible to be fully self-actualised versions of themselves, encouraging Lolla to make use of her horns; to celebrate the strength and the power they bring her. Lolla learns that her “flesh is worthy of love and adoration in its natural state” (hooks, 2015, 32); and that nothing must be added nor removed unless *she* chose further change. Through the liminality of fictional “other worlds” it is hoped that the *players* too, are able to come to the same conclusion regarding their own bodies.

The demo of *Paralolla* ends when the handheld console begins to act as a transmitter between the two realities, allowing Lolla and Ishani to communicate with one another. Realising the danger her best friend is in and desperate to intervene, Lolla quests to find a way home. Ishani remains exempt from the liberation of the heterotopia as the motivational tool behind Lolla’s higher goals to change the world *outside* of herself – through the bonds of sisterhood she is driven to end the systems of oppression in her native reality.

A map of Lolla’s total journey through the included segment of the playable demo is available in the Appendix.

Iterations:



Figure 18: A television/the previous concept of the portal to the heterotopia.

In the initial construct of *Paralolla*, the protagonist and the characters within the game were perfectly human. The exception to this was the character of Ishani, who although still humanoid had horns atop her head and lived within/was native to the **heterotopia**. The “portal” to this heterotopia was accessed via the screen of an old television set (image left) rather than the handheld console, the residing boarding school entirely abandoned – this meant no “administration” and no ceremony. However, Lolla’s arm was broken and in a cast in her world but morphed to a weapon in the heterotopia.

The inspirations for changes to this original concept were largely concerned with the links between Foucault and Butler and the systems of power built around the gender binary; considering how these systems can give birth to heterotopic spaces, and how we might enact gender according to the spaces we occupy.

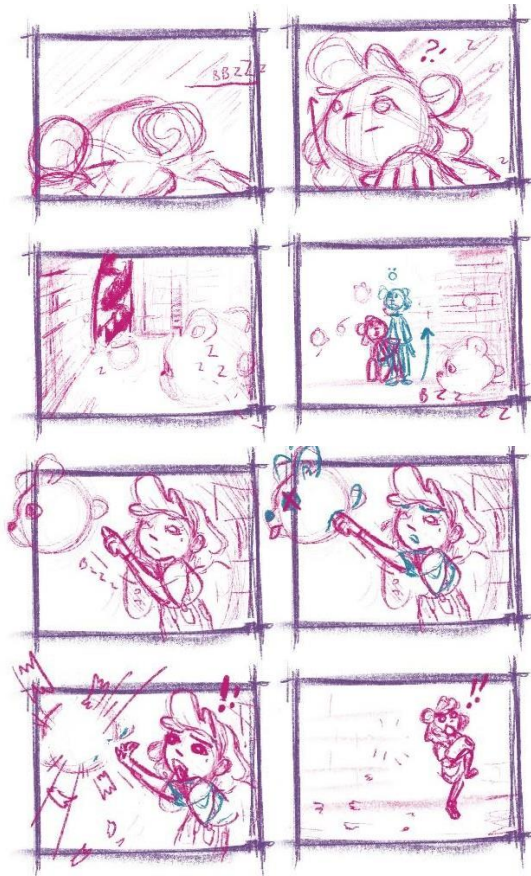
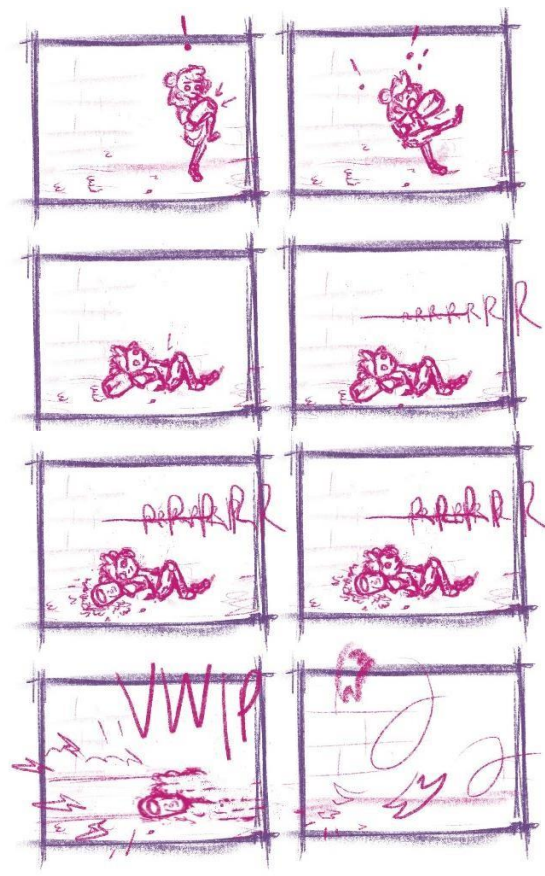
[Below: the previous, humanoid concept art of Ishani and Lolla.]



Figure 19: The previous concept of Ishani.



Figure 20: Previous conceptualisations of Lolla.

Figure 21: Previous storyboards of *Paralolla* - 1Figure 22: Previous storyboards of *Paralolla* - 2.

[Above: previous storyboarding of *Paralolla*.]

By creating the two worlds of the *Trifling*, I can both create and suggest the fallacies of a binary system of power and the liberation we might find within the absence of such. This shift from human to *not-human* also reflected the inspiration found in the *Netflix* series adaption of Jim Henson's *The Dark Crystal* (2019). In this film, Henson was able to depict a world wholly unlike ours – bar most language and a plutocratic power structure for the protagonists to challenge. Through the lens of this world, we are able to define how/where the power structures in place become problematic – and more importantly, draw a comparison to the same or similar constructs in *our reality*.

The characters in *Parallola* recalls the inequitable balance of power between the Skeksis and Gelflings in *The Dark Crystal*, in the following dialogue sequence; “Skeksis reign a thousand trine and will reign a thousand, thousand more, until last star in sky goes dark. Gelfling will submit, head bowed, back bent as have always done. Gelfling want to be ruled. Gelfling need to be ruled. Because Gelfling are weak! Gelfling are small. And Skeksis are forever!” (Leterrier, 2019, E01: “End. Begin. All the Same.” 56:50)

The medium of the video game allows us to create simulations of an experience under the systems/power structures we have designed or implemented. It allows us the experience of oppression, or of privilege. According to Shapiro, “digital tools act like a bridge between individual and common experiences [...] they help us to mediate our relationship with the world around us.” (Shapiro, 2018, chapter 6). *Paralolla* places the player in Lolla’s present, and alongside her they experience her world and the world of the heterotopia – they learn what it might be like to live in a world domineered by a binary construct of identity and then later find themselves in a new world devoid of that very construct.

The handheld gaming console represents this journey, as it is through the console that Lolla has access to the heterotopia and therefore the empowerment of discovering herself outside of an enforced binary, and it is through the idea of the console – through gaming – that we can offer this same liberation to young womxn. More so, we can express thoughts of gender enactment and intersectionality to non-feminist thinkers. The medium of the video game can help players “develop the critical thinking skills necessary to understand the operation of systems of oppression” (Allen, 2014, 62) as well as teach alternative gender discourse and allow for individual agency and creativity in making sense of the self.

Lolla grows beyond the borders of an abstraction of the gender binary but through Ishani and the other students (still in their native reality) remains connected to that system. Learning the fundamental issues of the juridical constructs of power that run her home world, Lolla must return to begin the dismantling of those foundations.

In *Paralolla*, conflict occurs around the regulation of the Trifling and the physical attributes they are born with. This is intended to allude to the drawbacks of an enforced binary structure of gender, as the Trifling undergo an age-long tradition of ceremonially severing appendages deemed “unfit” for their kind. Lolla’s horns are tooth threatening; Ishani’s third eye allows her a foresight that’s unnatural – the Trifling are stripped of their innate strengths to uphold a subservient, powerless portrayal of themselves. The addition of this ceremony symbolizes the pressures of physical transformation present for womxn, and the alteration of bodies to meet gendered expectations.

The pressure to conform to one’s gender is explained by Patricia Gagne and Richard Tewksbury in “*Conformity Pressures and Gender Resistance Among Transgendered Individuals*” which describes the body as an essential component of identity (1998). The pressure to transform our presentations and physical selves is to *conform* to notions of the “opposite” sex and gender category, compelled by the fear of rejection or the desire for self-preservation. “The achievement of an identity that is recognized by others requires conformity to the binary system... what once seemed possible only via resistance, in the end is only attainable through conformity.”

(Gagne & Tewksbury, 2020, 98). Gagne and Tewksbury explain that in this way, alternative gender discourse both challenges and reifies the gender binary system, and thus from a Foucauldian perspective, is neither “subservient to power nor raised up against it”. (ibid. 100)

Conclusion

Through the research of *Paralolla* I have engaged in feminist and gender studies that have reshaped my perspective of the world around me. I have achieved a deeper and more nuanced understanding of feminism, gender, metaphysical dualism and power structures. This has given me a new understanding of the social world which inspires a compassion in respect of intersectionality within me, as well as the confidence to more authentically self-express. My views on feminism have become more securely third wave as I learned of the notions of gender enactment and intersectionality. bell hooks calls for both a mass-based movement within feminism and the provision of “educational arenas” to children “where anti-sexist biases are not the standards used to judge behaviour” (hooks, 2015, 75). I believe that gaming allows us a potential platform to achieve such.

“The Videoludic Cyborg: Queer/Feminist Reappropriations and Hybridity” by Roxanne Chartrand and Pascale Thériault discusses the subversive nature of games as a unique opportunity for the conceptualisation of the self. In which, they submit what I would consider a solution to issues Butler addresses regarding gender performance, and issues of gender conformity (Gagne and Tewksbury, 1998). “In this sense, [games which allow alternative explorations of self] could be seen as part of a post-humanist movement that aims to recrystallize identity within a virtual space, thus getting rid of physical imperatives of identity performativity” (Chartrand and Theriault, 2018, 2). Video games, in this context, are conceived as a space within which players are allowed to both explore and subvert rules, allowing the phantasmagoria not of an eroticised nature which Mulvey (1989) and DeRosa (2009) note as problematic, but of a “post-human identity which transcends the physical norms and space, to the benefit of individuals and groups who subvert the norms of cisgendered masculine heterosexuality” (Chartrand and Theriault, 2018, 2).

This subversion also lies within the nature of the heterotopia. In *Paralolla*, the player is exposed to two sides of the protagonists’ boarding school. That very environment, even outside of the handheld console and “other” world within, is heterotopic. In “*Of Other Spaces*” where Foucault discusses heterotopias (1986), he lists boarding schools as ones of crisis. He then later analyses these and other educational institutions in “*Discipline and Punish*”, exploring how discipline is used to create ‘docile’ bodies (Foucault, 1995). “[D]iscipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)” (ibid., 138). *Paralolla* features an all-girls boarding school, which prepares girls for entry into their expected positions within society. Essentially, the environment of the girls boarding school in Lolla’s native world represents the preservation of a gender binary which polices the physical body. The environment itself, as a heterotopia, allows the exploration of this enforced structure of identity only to subvert it within the “other” world inside the handheld console. Here, mutuality is the norm. In this world, “there may be times when all is not equal, but the consequence of that inequality will not be subordination, colonization, and dehumanization” (hooks, 2015, 117). The “other” world is a heterotopia of love that “combines acknowledgement, care,

responsibility, commitment, and knowledge” (ibid., 104), through which it has flourished beyond the physical limitations which exist in Lolla’s native reality.

The discourse that was partaken in this research (particularly the concepts of Foucault, Butler, and hooks) shaped the practice of *Paralolla*. The theories and discussions were considered under the Values at Play (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2007) methodologies to be of high benefit in discovering the core values and intentions of the game, as well as the translation of these values into architecture (the implemented ‘natural’ and subverted environments of the boarding school) and features. This translation allows the embodying and expressing of core values in the design of *Paralolla*. Where I would have liked to explore further is the verification aspect of this methodology. Flanagan and Nissenbaum refer to the verification stage of the VAP process as the point in which the designers themselves appraise whether they have been successful in embedding the defined values into their designed system. With a focus on young womxn and gender diverse between the ages 12 – 25, I believe *Paralolla*’s success in this manner can only be discerned symbolically or through intention. Through playtesting and user-feedback from the focus group, perhaps with a tailored survey regarding the experience of the gender-dictated and gender-diverse heterotopias in *Paralolla*, I will be better able to verify the success of embedded values and the extent to which they teach feminist discourse and allow for gender empowerment in gaming (through the example of *Paralolla*).

Through intention, I believe ensuring the core values of gender identity and diversity, intersectionality, and empowerment are continuously fostered allowed deeper thought to be put into all aspects of design, from the earliest stages of Lolla as a human to the iterations still to be made. Sharing the concepts of *Paralolla* online, I received messages of interest for collaboration. I believe a fully developed version of *Paralolla* has the potential to chaperone an intersectional, loving feminist revolution that challenges the gender binary and takes place in gaming. Considering future developments, I would be interested in expanding to mobile to make the game even more accessible, and therefore more aligned with a mass-based movement. I would investigate further the benefits of the platform to the focus group. Through the engagement of feminist pedagogy combined with the implementation of the heterotopia, careful considerations of female representation in gaming and narrative, and particularly the connection with the core values of the research allow *Paralolla* to begin carving ways for alternative explorations of gender identity and the teaching of feminist discourse that allows the young womxn reprieve from the westernized metaphysical dualism that restrains their gender identity.

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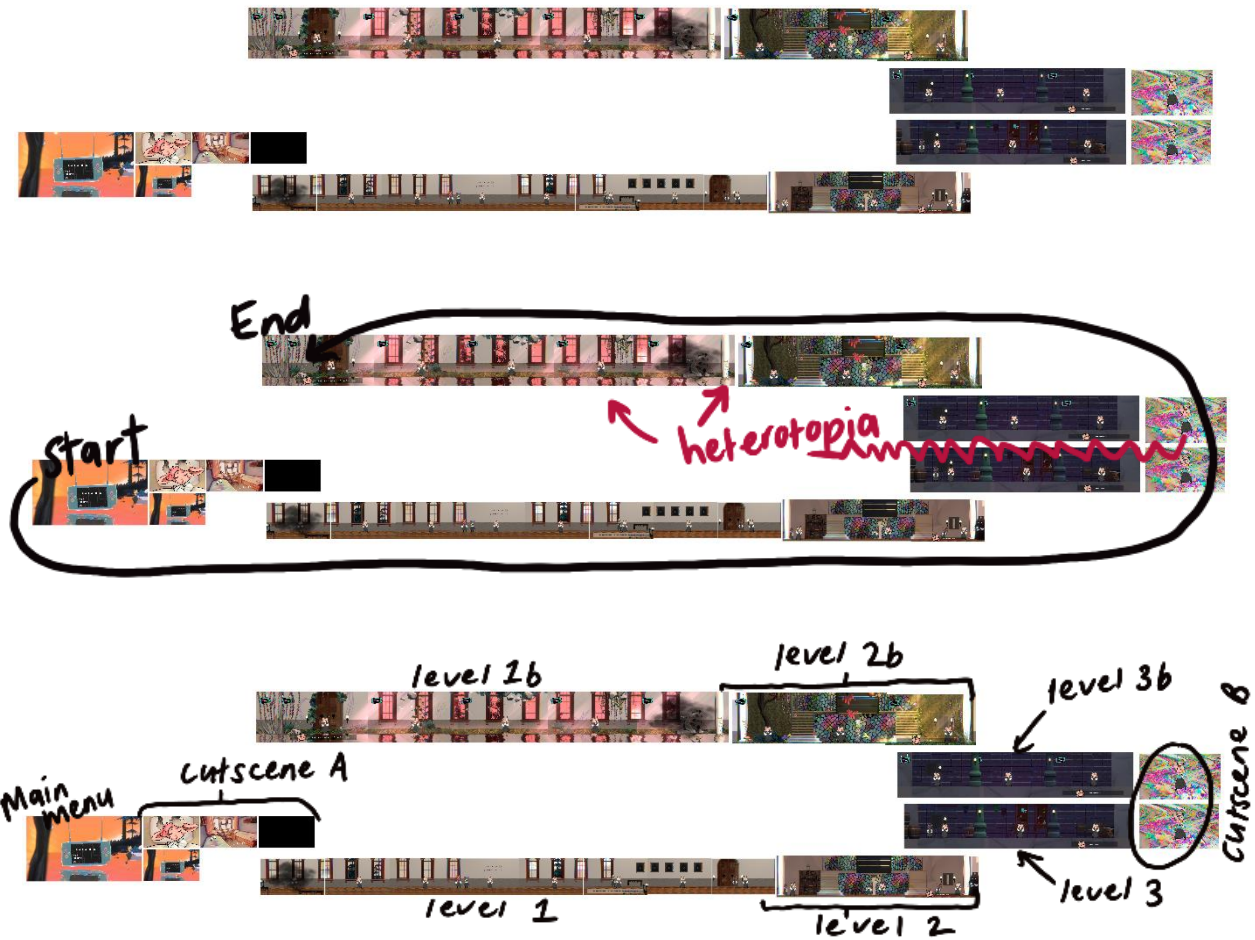
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Appendix

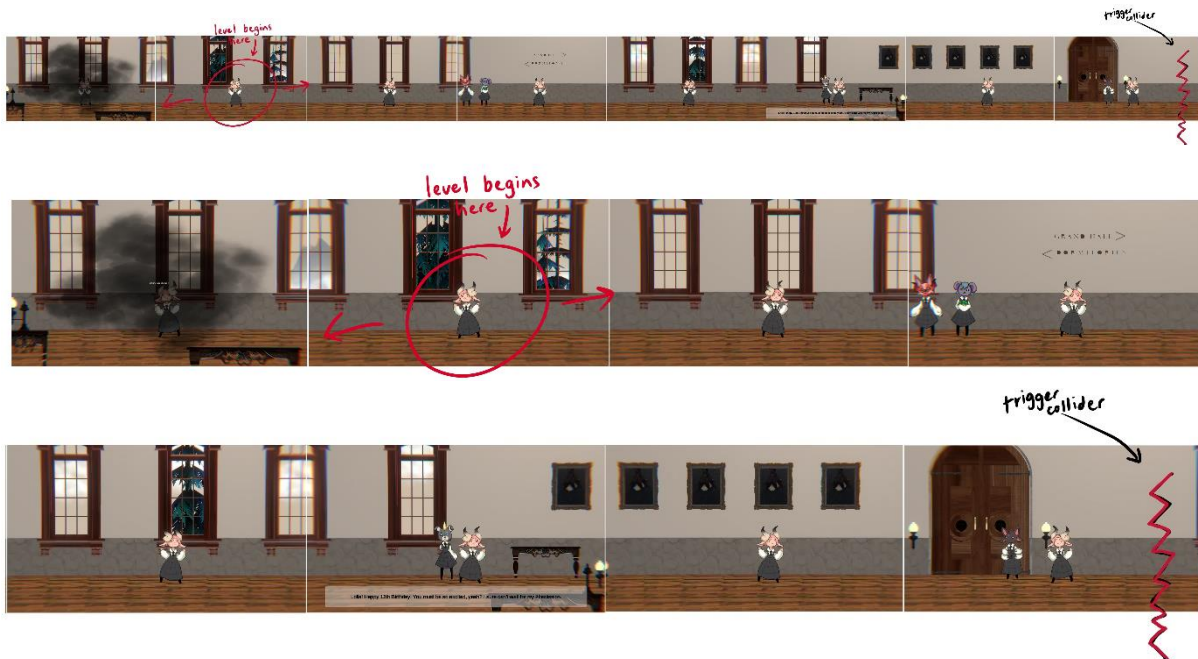
Attached is the map of Lolla's journey through the available demo of *Paralolla*. I have also broken this down into levels and annotated such for clarification.



Main menu, cutscene A annotated:



The cutscene transitions Lolla to level 1:



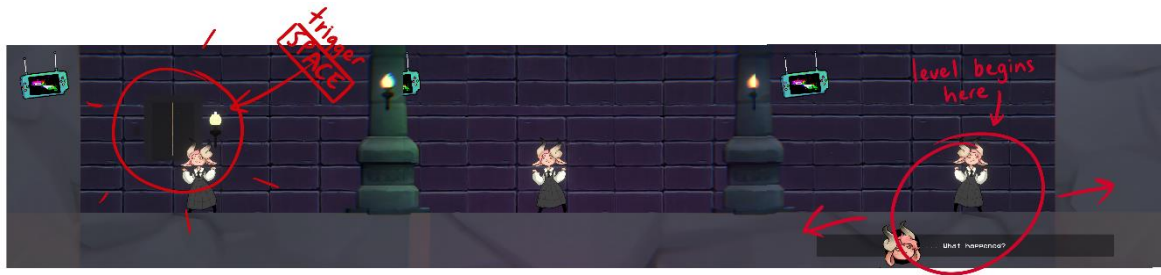
The trigger attached to the collider at the end of the hall transitions Lolla to level 2:



Pressing the spacebar on this trigger lifts Lolla to level 3:



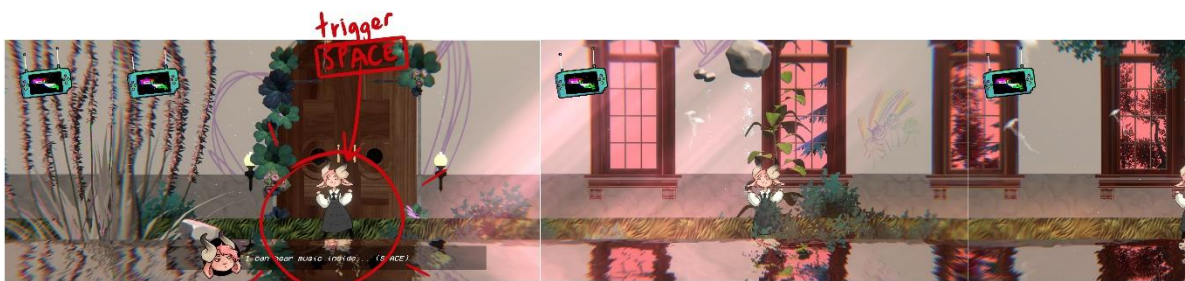
The player must collect the hidden key to initiate the trigger attached to the locked chest. This begins cutscene B, which automatically transitions Lolla to level 3b upon end (note that Lolla now moves from right to left):



Pressing the spacebar on this trigger lowers Lolla to level 2a:



The trigger attached to the collider at the end of the stairway transitions Lolla to level 1a:



Pressing the spacebar on this trigger ends the game and returns the player to the main menu.