

Hook, Line & Sinker



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Hook, Line & Sinker

Exploring queer identity and experiences
through video game design



This thesis is submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Design.

Gabrielle Gavin

Bachelor of Design, Auckland University of Technology (2023).

5th May 2025

Abstract

This practice-enabled research thesis investigates how a narrative-driven video game can employ naïvely illustrated artwork to visual queer identity and experiences. Drawing on the researcher's experiences as a queer adolescent navigating a religious secondary school education, the study explores ways in which the crafting of video game assets can be used to interpret queer oppression, and failure. Methodologically, the thesis employed a heuristic inquiry that imported iterative design and auto-biographic elements to assist in the creation of a video game (Hook, Line & Sinker). The project's significance lies in its exploration of handcrafting, linear narrative, ironical humour and world creation as a means of expressing identity oppression experienced by queer secondary school students.

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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 mentioned), 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.

Gabrielle Gavin,

5th May 2025

Intellectual property declaration

I retain copyright in all images and creative work produced and presented as part of this thesis, apart from the following images that are the intellectual property of others listed below in the order they appear in this exegesis:

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5th May 2025

Ethics approval and consents

This research project constituted an artistic inquiry that did not involve the use of animal or human participants, clinical trials, or a solicited response from a reference group. Accordingly, it did not require ethical approval.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The research question

In 1975, the American psychologist Nicolas Hobbs said, “Society defines what is exceptional as deviant and appropriate treatments are designed quite as much to protect society as they are to help the child” (p. 20).

This thesis is situated outside the school gates. It looks back over its shoulder at a religious secondary schooling in Aotearoa New Zealand and gamifies devices the organisation used to protect itself (and the society it envisioned) from the queerness of the researcher. Accordingly, the study asks:

How might an artistic researcher employ naïve characterisation and metaphor to drive a context defined video game that depicts queer experience and failure?

Rationale

Queer students often encounter a difficult educational experience compared to their non queer peers (Clark et al., 2013; Denny et al., 2016; Garcia et al., 2024; New Zealand Human Rights Commission, 2020; Wilson & Cariola, 2020).

McGlashan and Fitzpatrick (2017) note that heteronormative environments, such as schools, create a culture wherein queer students are more likely to be marginalised or feel like outsiders because heterosexuality is generally considered to be the norm.

Fenaughty et al. (2023) note that although queer youth still experience vulnerability in New Zealand, transgender (trans) youth are more vulnerable to mistreatment and having their safety compromised than their cisgender peers. In their study, one out of every 100 Youth19 participants identified as trans (1%), and more than half (57%) of these students reported significant depressive symptoms, and an equal proportion reported they had self-harmed in the past year. Over half of the trans students (55%) had been unable to access healthcare in times of need in the past year.

Given this situation, how adolescent identity is described and experienced is of importance for queer youth. Many New Zealand secondary schools seek to support queer-identifying students (Denny et al. 2016; Ellis & Bentham, 2021; InsideOUT Kōaro, 2021; Leung et al., 2022), however students also build and reinforce their queer identities outside of formal education environments through things like extracurricular clubs, teams or community-based volunteering activities (Fenaughty et al. 2023).

Significant in this realm of alternative environments are video games. Studies by Blanco-Fernández and Moreno (2023) and McKenna et al. (2024) note that queer adolescents and young adults may utilise video games as an outlet to explore and affirm their identities. McKenna et al.’s (2024) study shows how the creation and customisation of player avatars can positively impact adolescent transgender and gender-diverse players because of the potential for video games to affirm their identity.

Significance

The significance of this research lies in both its artefact design and exegetical discussion.

First, the study contributes to existing discourses surrounding queer failure (Halberstam 2011; Mica et al., 2022) and how this is tied to explorations of queer identity within video game experience (Cabrales 2021; Pelurson, 2022; Ruberg, 2015, 2019). However, the project extends these studies by providing a proof-of-concept artefact wherein an emphasis on failure is treated as an intentionally designed game mechanic. Thus, the concept of “queer failure” that is currently a largely theorised condition is given substance in a designed, immersive gaming experience.

The second contribution the study makes is in its construction of the marginalised experience of queer characters inside a nonsecular education system. In so doing, the game provides a counter-discourse to heteronormative constructions of secondary schooling through its overt exploration of queerness and institutional oppression that can surround it.

Key terms in the study

Given the interdisciplinary nature of the inquiry, six terms used in the exegesis warrant initial definition.

Queer

The word “queer” has an uncertain origin but was present in the English language by the early 16th century when it was used to describe strange, peculiar, or eccentric behaviour (Jones, 2023). Jones notes that since the late 19th century, the term queer has accrued both positive and negative connotations. In contemporary use, queer is often used as an umbrella term that encompasses diverse sexualities and genders and it can be employed as an individual identifier for someone who is not cisgender or heterosexual (InsideOUT, 2023).

In this study, I use queer as an inclusive term that encompasses diverse sexualities and gender identities within the LGBTQIA+ community. However, I acknowledge that not all of the LGBTQIA+ community feel comfortable being referred to as queer or using the term as an identifier. Personally, the term queer signals a safe, accepting environment and solidarity among others who have similar lived experiences to me.

Naïve design

The adjective naïve is used in this thesis to denote a design treatment where a game’s aesthetic is rendered in a style that deliberately rejects sophisticated artistic techniques. Instead, it proposes a paradoxical form of seemingly innocent “knowing” that lurks ironically behind childlike graphics and simple movement.

Queer failure

Halberstam (2011) notes that queer people have often been seen as failures because our existence defies heterosexual (and cisgender) societal norms. Halberstam argues that queer failure encompasses ways of thinking and existing that lie outside of conventional understandings of success. In Queer theory, queer failure is not an inherently negative concept; it encourages the acceptance and revelling in one’s failures to find the absurdity, silliness and joy in rejecting societal norms through merely existing (Halberstam, 2011). Through this practice, queer failure dismantles traditional ideas that surround the concept of success.

Research-enabled practice

Methodologically, I describe the thesis as research-enabled practice. In such studies, Batty and Zalipour (2024) note that the researcher contributes to knowledge through creative outputs. Research-enabled practice places its focus on testing and expanding on the existing knowledge within a practice “thereby expanding established theories, ideas and/or practices

through creative application in the form of a new work (research output)” (Batty & Zalipour, 2024, p. 13). These authors suggest that a creative output (or research output) invites others to the topic through engagement with its material form. In the context of this study, a video game invites others to explore queerness in a theologically-shaped, educational environment by playing and exploring a game called Hook, Line & Sinker.

Worldbuilding

Von Stackelberg and McDowell (2015) describe worldbuilding as the creation of fictional worlds that contain coherent geographical, social, cultural, and other features. These worlds constitute universes in which stories are set. They provide contextual rule sets and a deep understanding of underlying systems that develop a larger reality beyond a story.

The nature of the research practice

The creative component of this exegesis is an interactive video game, Hook, Line & Sinker. The game is constructed as a proof-of-concept that demonstrates the core mechanics and overall narrative, providing a foundation for future development. The game allows players to explore a linear narrative and interact with in-game spaces inside an intolerant, theologically-shaped educational environment.

The structure of the exegesis

This exegesis is divided into five chapters. The first serves as an introduction to the study. It outlines the research question, discusses the study’s rationale and significance, defines key terms used in the project, and the structure of the practice and exegesis.

In Chapter Two, I position myself within the inquiry. Because of the auto-biographic elements present in the thesis, I discuss my upbringing and queer adolescent experiences in the Catholic Church and how this has contributed to the questions and ironies I address in the study.

The third chapter provides a review of contextual knowledge. It is divided into two subsections: literature relating to narrative structure in queer video game design, and the nature of queer failure and its relationship to control.

The fourth chapter unpacks the project’s research design. It examines the methodological approach taken and specific methods utilised in addressing the research question.

Chapter Five offers a critical commentary on the video game. In so doing it considers Roman Catholic iconography, character design, queer failure, game design and illustrative naïvety.

This chapter is followed by the exegesis’ conclusion. This provides a summary of the study, a consideration of contributions to knowledge and a discussion of potential future directions that I intend to pursue following the completion of the thesis.

CHAPTER TWO: POSITIONING THE RESEARCHER

A Catholic upbringing

Cold and grey, the concrete floor blends with panelled wooden walls. In ordered progression on these walls hang the twelve Stations of the Cross and between each, there is a stained-glass window. From their high perches, they paint the floor with the colours of the rainbow. In alcoves and on pedestals, statues depicting the persecution and rising of Jesus watch at silent attention.

This was the world of my adolescence. I was schooled inside the church. Although my parents were not particularly religious, they felt that a Catholic education would increase the likelihood of my brother and I eventually gaining access to university.

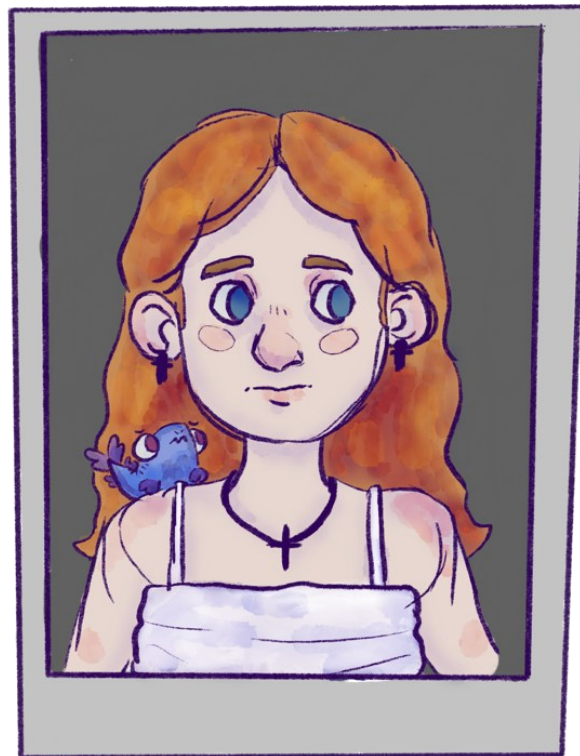
On the day of my confirmation, I remember the church was cold but filled with chatter. We children were draped in white, gathered on the steps before the altar watched by a congregation who were teary and full of pride.

I did not want to be confirmed and accept the Eucharist (the body of Christ/the round flat bread) and my parents would have supported my decision. However, my extended family, teachers, and peers would have questioned my reluctance and judged me for it. Confirmation was not mandatory, but it was expected. If I was not confirmed, I knew that I would be the only child in my cohort of 30 who wouldn't be standing by the altar.

In reflection, I realise that I was an anxious, goody-two-shoes kid (even when I was young). But I also felt that I was an outsider (Figure 2.1). I questioned things in silence, guilty for doubting the Bible and God. In the world of my childhood, I was obedient yet always subtly separate. In an effort to hide this separation, I agreed to be confirmed. With this choice came new expectations. I stayed under the radar, no matter how much I wanted to resist. It was better than being judged and criticised.² I comforted myself with the small realisation that receiving the Eucharist occurred at the point when I started getting hungry during Mass.

² Upon reflection, this seems ironic considering the Catholic commandment. "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get." (*Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition [RSVCE]*, 2006, Matthew 7: 1-2.)

Figure 2.1 Digital illustration from a photograph taken at my first communion



Queer in an all-girls Catholic school

I was eleven when I first learned that there were queer people. My Nana was celebrating her 80th birthday and my mother's siblings were organising a celebration. My aunty was flying over from the States and bringing her girlfriend, so my mother asked me to explain to my brother what a lesbian was.

I had no clue what a lesbian was.

My mum was annoyed. In hindsight, I can see that she was not enthusiastic about the idea that my aunty was dating a woman, but at the time, I didn't understand. I didn't care if my aunty was a lesbian; I was excited to see her. I hoped that her girlfriend was nice.

When I was seventeen, after several years of doubt, denial and shame, I came to terms with the fact that I was also queer (although I wasn't sure of the details). I definitely knew that I wasn't straight. But my realisation wasn't something that I shouted from the rooftops. I had already learned at school that queerness was dangerous. It was never brought up by staff without students prodding them to do so, and I had only ever heard students talk about it in hushed voices.

However, in my final years of high school, I increasingly began to encounter homophobic rhetoric. It seemed benign—but it had sharpened teeth.

"I support gay people, just not their lifestyle."

"I can't be homophobic, I have gay friends!"

"Being gay is a choice."

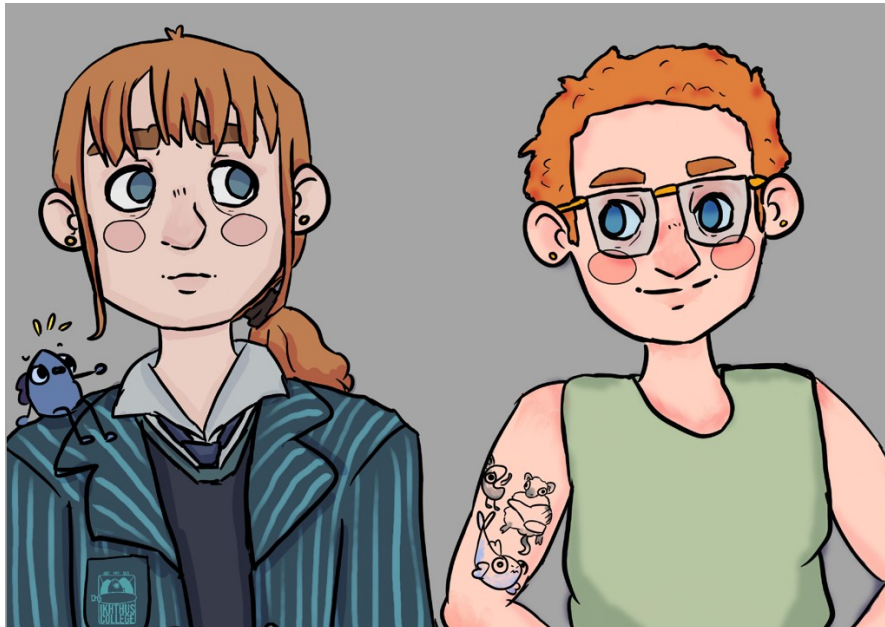
However, beneath these comments was something darker that was shadowed by ignorance and judgment.

“You’re going to Hell because you’re gay.”

In my final years of school, I encountered rare occasions where my peers forced answers out of the staff. Some teachers were supportive, but most either ignored or were explicitly opposed to the existence of queer people. The school (and by extension, the Catholic Church) told us to “come as we are”, that we were beautiful and loved just as we are. But behind this was the understanding that we were accepted and celebrated only if we conformed to their expectations of young heterosexual, Catholic women.

It was a relief for me to finally leave the church at eighteen. I could stop pretending that I wasn’t queer (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2 Before and after I left the Catholic Church



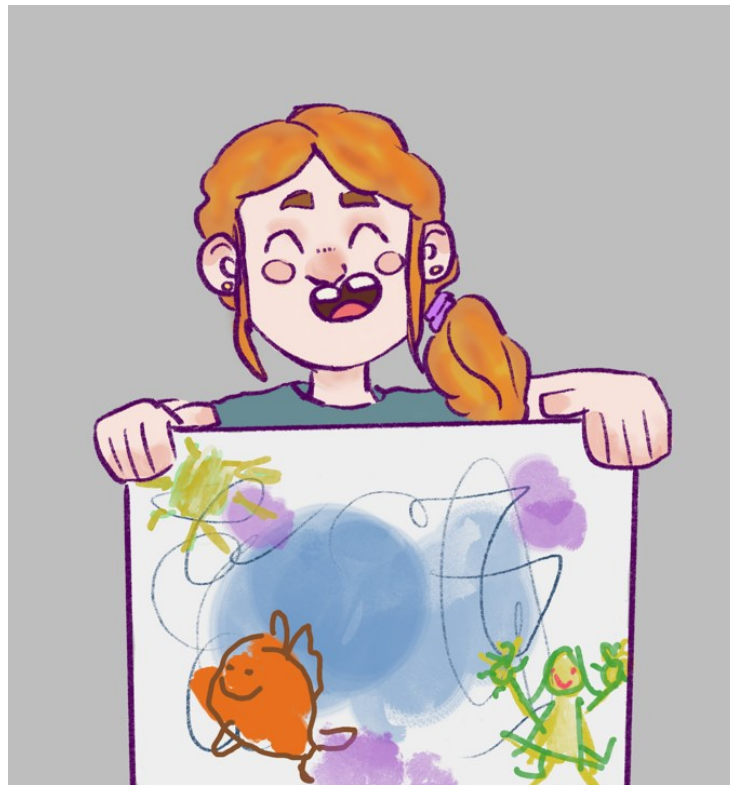
Finding safe spaces

As a kid, I found solace in books. I buried myself in fantasy worlds, reading about adventures that left me wonder-struck. My Dad loved video games. Although I have childhood memories of playing through the original Crash Bandicoot trilogy with him and my brother, video games didn’t become a safe space for me until my teens.

Games like Minecraft, Pokémon, and Animal Crossing eventually became an outlet for me. I could shape these worlds into spaces where I could fit. In these realms I was no longer an outsider. I could play at my own pace, however I wished. I could be whoever I imagined, making up my own stories or placing myself in an embedded narrative. If I wanted to, I could scrap everything and start from scratch again. Video games eventually took the spaces that books once provided in my life.

Unlike Dad, my mother was not interested in video games. She helped me to explore crafts (glitter and pom poms became my preoccupation). I had always loved creating but I didn't pursue it seriously until I entered high school.

Figure 2.3 My child self, proudly holding an artwork



During my secondary education, my art teachers pushed me beyond my comfort zone; their enthusiasm and support caused my father to suggest I study art at university. I had never considered a career where I might just make things. My public plan had been to train as an early childhood education (ECE) teacher.

Orientation

This thesis draws from these three realms: my love of story worlds, the sanctuary of video games and a desire to explore modes of visual communication as interactive mediums.

The project surfaced through a body of work I completed as part of an undergraduate project called The Incident. In this fictional game, I designed an NPC (nonplayable character) called Detective Vermin, who assisted an undead player (who is a ghost) in solving the mystery behind their demise (Figure 2.4).

Figure 2.4 Detective Vermin expression illustrations for The Incident (2023)



The design and development of the rat detective (and other characters) opened a realm for exploring the potential of anthropomorphic actors who could traverse complicated worlds.

As I progressed my thinking into postgraduate study, I began to consider how I might use these devices to create an allegorical game that allowed players to experience and empathise with an outsider who is forced to navigate secondary education in a theologically-determined environment. I wanted to bring something into the world that was missing when I was young; something that might counter shame and guilt – something that understood and acknowledged the existence of queer kids in nonaccepting spaces like New Zealand secondary schools.

CHAPTER THREE: REVIEW OF RELATED KNOWLEDGE

Introduction

The chapter reviews two areas of knowledge; literature relating to narrative structure in queer video game design, and the nature of queer failure.

Story and narrative

According to Abbott (2008), the words story and narrative have different meanings, with story describing an event or sequence of events, and narrative referring to the representation of these events. In other words, a narrative refers to the particular construction of a story. A story may have many alternative narratives (or ways of being told).

The concepts of narrative and story in video games have been discussed by diverse writers, including Anthropy and Clark (2014), Breault (2020), Heussner (2019), Ruberg and Shaw (2017), and Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan (2004). Story and narrative in video game scholarship have long been topics of debate. In the early 2000s, ludologists³ and narratologists contested analyses of narratives in video games, the former believing that games studies should focus on game mechanics, whilst the latter argued that games are closely linked to stories and thus, narrative must be considered when examining their construction and purpose (Farca, 2011; Frasca, 2003).

Salen and Zimmerman (2003) propose that the aim of a narrative in video game design is to provide the player structure and guidance towards important elements (like boss battles), while providing a context inside which one can build an understanding of the game world.

Narrative and story in game design

Jenkins (2004) and Salen and Zimmerman (2003) divide narrative experiences in games into four types; evocative, enacting, embedded, and emergent.

Evocative narratives tend not to have self-contained stories, instead, they draw on a player's previous experiences, retelling a preexisting story, or building on broadly shared genre tropes.

Enacting narratives enable a player to witness or perform narrative events.⁴

Embedded narratives utilise pre-scripted structures and content that exist prior to the player interacting with the game. In these games, designers structure interaction and movement through the game world and provide the main story arc of the game.

An emergent narrative is one where the narrative is outside of the game designer's control. Here, the narrative develops in response to how a player interacts with the game world and as a consequence the narratives are unpredictable (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003).

³ Ludology may refer to the study of games in general, to a particular approach to researching games, or to a movement active between 1998–2001. Ludology was proffered as a new methodological approach needed to make sense of games and their structures. It was positioned as a parallel discipline to narratology (Wolf & Perron, 2013).

⁴ Jenkins (2004) note that enacting narratives is what is often referred to when discussing games as stories.

Although Breault (2020) argues that the story in game design provides the foundation that gives a player agency, Jenkins (2004) note that although storytelling can be integral to game design, not every game tells stories. Significantly, they observe that many games reinforce their narratives by drawing on emotions experienced in the previous narrative experiences of players, and their familiarity with roles and goals of the given genre. Accordingly, they suggest that character and level design, play significant roles in the narrative – alongside the story.

Breault argues that stories within games encourage a player to be curious and engaged when gameplay becomes stale, and they give the player context for their actions. Conversely, Jenkins proposes that leaving narrative interpretation open to the player allows room for curiosity, and encourages individuals to tailor the narrative to themselves rather than relying on tropes or stereotypes.

Queer narrative

The design of *Hook, Line & Sinker* is influenced by the concept of queer narrative. Queer narratives have been discussed by a number of writers, including Brice (2013), Halberstam (2011), Keogh (2013), Ruberg (2015; 2020; 2022), Ruberg and Shaw (2017), Sawyer (2021), and Warhol and Lanser (2015).

Warhol and Lanser observe that,

... narratives are critical to constructing, maintaining, interpreting, exposing and dismantling the social systems, cultural practices, and individual lives that shape and are shaped by performative acts. Feminist and queer narrative theorists identify and demystify the workings of those norms in and through narrative, and expose the dominant stories. (pp. 7–8)

Warhol and Lanser define queer as an “aim to understand, analyse, and rectify heteronormative systems and practices and their attendant binary assumptions about sex, gender, and sexuality” (p. 2). They propose that, in relation to autobiographical narration, queer “evokes the doubt, uncertainty, and blurred vision attendant upon the articulation of queer lives and a caveat against taking ‘clarity and precision.’” (p. 12)

Queer narratives in video games are often constructed when game designers draw from their queer-experiences to create personal stories of identity, after struggling inside heteronormative environments (Ruberg, 2020).

Ruberg and Shaw (2017) suggest that narrative content of queer games may be explicitly queer, kinky or sexual in nature. However, Ruberg (2020) notes that some queer games do not include queer people, leaning instead on the concept of queerness as a state and a mode of engaging with queer perspectives.

Ruberg and Shaw suggest that queer narratives can also be realised in the predefined structure of game narratives when they break norms and establish new rules. These rules may be disrupted through the narrative structure, the use of software, or game-making tools. Ellison (2013) describes Anna Antrophy's *Dys4ia* (2012) (created using Twine)⁵ as an

⁵ Twine is a free, open-source tool for making interactive and hypertext fiction games without coding. It was initially released in 2009. It focuses on text-based storytelling and branching or nonlinear narratives.

example of this. Here, although the queer designer's voice is explicit in both the writing and commitment behind the game, queerness as a disruption to the dominant order is also asserted because the game is constructed by a solo indie developer.⁶

Hook, Line & Sinkers may be framed as a queer narrative because of its autobiographical queer content (Ruberg, 2020), its explicit use of doubt and failure (Warhol & Lanser, 2015), its subversive use of imagery (where iconography associated with Roman Catholic education is undermined using ironic humour and association) and the game's purpose of understanding and unpacking a heteronormative system and practices and consequential assumptions about sex, gender, and sexuality. In so doing, the game challenges the prevalence of stories of secondary education that assume dominant, heteronormative, identity development.

Significant queer games that contextualise the study

There are many queer games that serve to contextualise this study, including *Coming Out Simulator* (Nicky Case, 2014), *Depression Quest* (The Quinnsspiracy, Patrick Lindsey, Isaac Schankler, 2013), *Howling Dogs* (Porpentine, 2012), *If Found...* (Dreamfeel, 2020), *Mainichi* (Mattie Brice, 2012), *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (Anna Anthropy, 2013), and *What's Your Gender?* (Purple Sloth, 2021). However, four games have significantly impacted on the thinking behind my thesis project: *Dys4ia* (Anna Anthropy, 2012), *Lim* (merritt k, 2012), *We Know The Devil* (Pillow Fight, Worse Girls Games, 2015), and *Celeste* (Maddy Makes Games, Extremely OK, Ltd., 2018).

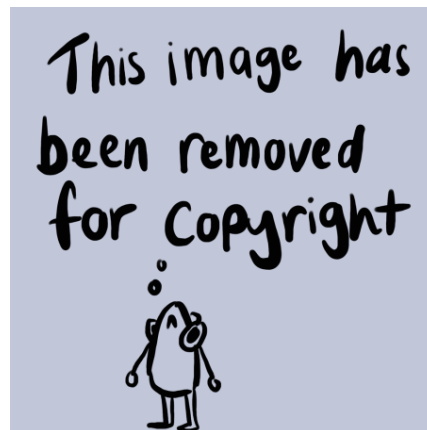
Dys4ia

Dys4ia uses a sequence of abstracted, playable vignettes⁷ to visualise the designer's experiences (Figure 3.1). The game utilises glitches, ending vignettes before the player has completed them. This results in a kind of forced failure and creates a sense of uncertainty and doubt that makes a player wonder if winning is even possible. Ruberg and Shaw (2017) note that these choices are intentional mechanics that remove control from the player. The device enables Anthropy (as the game designer) to force the player to observe and experience an unstable world from her perspective.

⁶ Ellison (2013) notes that there are significant economic barriers in game development and *Twine* as an open-source tool, enables game designers to create simple stories without writing code. It also enables them to extend stories with variables, conditional logic, images, CSS, and JavaScript. The level of agency such tools afford designers, enables them to work effectively outside of the expensive, commercialised realm of conventional game development.

⁷ Henderson (2021) notes that a vignette in video games is the same as a vignette in theatre. The word describes a short and evocative piece that portrays a sense of character or place.

Figure 3.1 Screenshot from *Dys4ia* (2012)



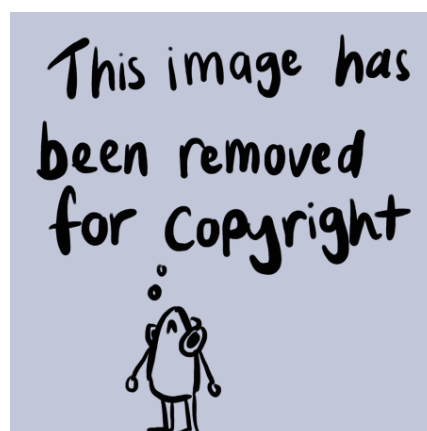
Note. *Dys4ia* (Anna Anthropy, 2012) is a short autobiographical video game telling the story of Anthropy's journey through the process of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) in the 2010s and her experience of transitioning.

Lim

Lim (merritt k, 2012) is a game about social dynamics that focuses on violence in liminal social spaces (Figure 3.2). In *Lim* (2012), the player is a multicoloured square that is attempting to reach the end of a narrow maze (Figure 3.2). While pursuing this goal, the player is attacked by other aggressive squares. To navigate the game, players must change their colour to blend in.

Like *Dys4ia*, *Lim* utilises failure as a game mechanic. If the player fails to blend in, they are attacked by other squares and their square is pushed aggressively, further back into the area they previously occupied. This aggression, if the player doesn't dexterously adapt, makes it almost impossible for them to progress. Despite the assaults, the player's multicoloured square cannot die – the only option presented to them is to relentlessly persevere to the end of the maze.

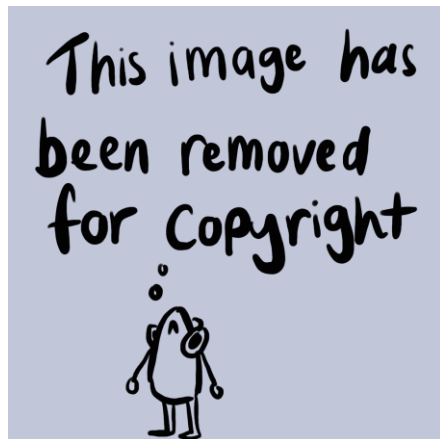
Figure 3.2 Screenshot of *Lim* (2012)



We Know The Devil

We Know The Devil (Pillow Fight, Worse Girls Games, 2015) is a horror-themed visual novel set in a church summer camp for misbehaved children that follows three girls waiting for the devil to appear (Figure 3.3). The game subverts the dating simulator genre.⁸ Structurally, instead of the player being the protagonist, they are a spectator whose choices directly affect the outcome of the novel. The game mechanic is choice, and inside the story world, the player must make decisions – pairing two of the girls up in certain situations and leaving the third one alone. These choices influence the ending of the game.⁹

Figure 3.3 Screenshot of We Know The Devil (2015)



Celeste

Celeste (Maddy Makes Games, Extremely OK Games, Ltd., 2018) is a 2D platformer that follows the playable character Madeline on her journey to climb Celeste Mountain in order to challenge her anxiety and depression (Figure 3.4).

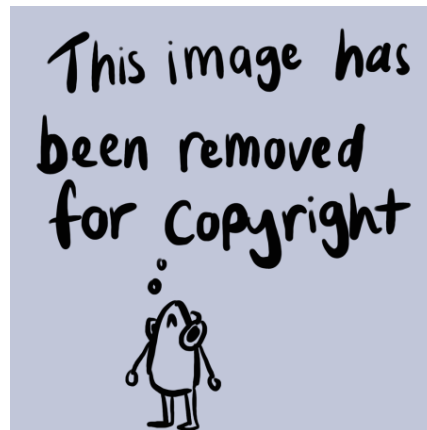
Celeste (2018) utilises frustration as a game mechanic; intentionally creating areas that challenge players but also irritate them. This can be seen in areas with large jumps, or challenges that require a considerable amount of climbing. The game effectively balances the frustration and failure that players encounter with elements that keep them engaged (such as a story arc or powerups that act as an incentive to progress to the next checkpoint).

The game generates doubt (which is commonly caused by frustration and failure). However, *Celeste* (2018) also utilises the taunting personification of Madeline's depression, Badeline. Badeline frustrates players by generating doubt (Warhol & Lanser, 2015) as she attempts to prevent Madeline from successfully climbing the mountain.

⁸ Martinez (2022) notes that dating simulation games (which are referred to as otome games when produced in Japan) are single-player video games wherein the player's main goal is to successfully court, or romance, their preferred suitor from a roster of available options.

⁹ There are four possible endings: Yellow, Red, Blue, and True.

Figure 3.4 Screenshot of Celeste (2018)



Failure and control

Defining failure and control

Carlson and Fishbach (2024) define failure as a condition that occurs when a person's performance in the pursuit of a goal, falls short of expectations or the standard of success that they have set for themselves.

McGregor and Elliot (2005) note that when encountering failure, people tend to feel a sense of shame and humiliation. Carlson and Fishbach, and Hefkaluk et al. (2024) observe that failure (and the act of failing) have negative connotations and are generally regarded as an unpleasant but unavoidable aspect of life.

Failure may be caused by a lack of control or an individual's inability to exercise agency (for example, being unable to perform effectively inside the debilitating expectations of an authoritarian organisation) (Baumeister, et al., 2007). In such instances, failure may impact on a personal or societal level and may affect one's health, wellbeing, or cultural and societal welfare (Walker, 2001).

Control through a religious lens

Hook, Line & Sinker is a game that explores queer failure and the nature of control. At its heart are religious metaphors (fish, crucifixes and allusions to Catholic education). The game is positioned inside a school system where religion exercises control over the thinking and actions of an individual through a culture of fear, avoidance and punishment.

Chriss (2013) notes that such social control can involve significant resources and mechanisms to ensure that people exhibit behaviours that conform to accepted norms.¹⁰ Hechter (2018) maintains that these norms are a part of the unspoken and often uncoded cultural background of everyday life.

¹⁰ Indicative biblical verses that allude to such control include: "5 and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ." (2 Corinthians 10:5); and "1 the Lord test the mind, and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings." (Jeremiah 17:10).

The concept of control inside contemporary Christian education has an interesting history that Long (1996) discusses in his analysis of the Christian schools movement in Australia, and the subsequent impact of “authoritarianism, separatism, underlying contradictions, lack of openness, fear of criticism, adversarial reactionism and managerial myopia” (pp. 425–426). Religious, authoritarian control is also examined in Hunter’s (1985) research into church-state relationships in Australia and the USA, and Scaramanga’s (2017) doctoral thesis that examined indoctrination systems in English accelerated Christian education, how children are controlled, and the impact on children once they leave education. In wider contexts, such control has been discussed by writers like Brandt and Renata (2024), Chriss (2013; 2020), Harris (2011), Hechter (2018), Hommel (2023), Knott (2024), Walker (2001), and Zarzycka et al. (2023).

Brandt and Renata (2024) have examined how control can significantly influence an individual’s decision to disengage and potentially leave a religion.¹¹ Their study is significant because it focuses on the experience of women. Their research revealed that religious control can permeate diverse dimensions of an individual’s life, including clothing choices, education and recommended occupations, in addition to prescribing roles within families and the church. Their study examined the experiences and feelings of women before they left prescriptive religious organisations. Many of the participants discussed feeling disconnected from their bodies and likened themselves to the church’s vessels -- not individual human beings with thoughts and feelings separate from the church). An earlier study by Mantsinen and Tervo-Niemelä (2020) examined why people leave religious organisations and noted that sexuality and gender issues can also have a significant impact.

How failure is queer?

The concept of societal control over queer identification is widely discussed, and within queer theory, there is a discernible strand of discourse that examines how failure is embedded within this. Mercier (2023) notes that significant contributions to the field in the work of Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, José Esteban Muñoz, and Jack Halberstam. Moon (2010) notes that queerness has long been compared to heteronormative societal expectations, and deviations from societal norms have often been deemed as defectiveness, or failure.

Queer lives are controlled and measured against heteronormative values and it is against the pervasiveness of this control that Muñoz (2009) positioned queer failure. Halberstam (2011, p. 3) says, “failure is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well.” Love (2007) observes that failure, rejection, feelings of illegitimacy, abnormality, and disconnection are often markers of queer lives and experiences. Mercier (2023, p. 452) argues that,

The norm produces normality and abnormality, success stories and failure stories; it turns queers into losers by rejecting them outside of criteria for acceptability, normality, and success. Normative figurations of success imply that queer subjects and queer experience in general are set for failure, resulting in affects of guilt and shame, loss, loneliness, and abandonment. Such figurations cast a dark shadow on queer subjectivities by depriving them of markers of success. [...] Failure, often construed as derivation from the moral and ethical norm, enables physical violence

¹¹ Brandt and Renata (2024) noted that control can be forcibly enacted through shunning and ex-communication of members of particular churches who do not adhere to strict standards, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (formerly known as Mormons) and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

towards queer bodies, perpetuates structural violence targeting queer lives, and encourages self-harm.

However, Halberstam (2011) argues that queer failure is not entirely negative because it can prompt positive effects. For example, queer failure can encompass and find value in ways of thinking and existing that lie outside the conventional understanding of success. Halberstam notes that queer failure involves an acceptance of the absurd and revelling in heteronormative failure. As an extension of this, Mercier (2023) discusses the integration of defiant failure in queer notions of emancipation, activism and strategic reframings of value.

Failure in video games

Having explored the relationships between control and failure in relation to queerness, it is useful to consider where and how these ideas have been examined in the design and experience of video games. According to Aytemiz and Smith (2020), failure in video games is an undesirable experience because it inhibits a player from making progress towards the objective (or goal) the game suggests.

This noted, Juul (2013) has argued that failure is paradoxically integral to video gaming, despite the frustration, anger, or sadness it can cause. This is because, he suggests, failure can be a motivation for players to set goals, reattempt previous strategies that failed, or attempt new strategies so they can progress and ultimately win (or feel as if they have won) a game. Given this situation, both Ruberg (2015) and Juul propose that failure should be reframed so, rather than being an unpleasant experience, it is reconceived as a stepping stone towards attainment.

Control in video games

Wysocki (2013) maintains that there are four types of control we might encounter in video games; full control, probabilistic control, emergent control, and no control.

In fully controlled games everything is predetermined and the player is aware of the outcome of each action and the state of the game environment (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003).

Probabilistic control refers to the player possessing intuitive knowledge surrounding the uncertainty of the game (for example, in dice-based games, the player is aware that their predicted or desired outcome may or may not occur – because the result depends on probability (Wysocki, 2013).

Emergent control comes when playing a game with a set of rules that produce behaviours which are initially unpredictable or unintuitive for the player. The player can respond to the outcomes of these rules and make choices to adapt so they increasingly feel in control (Wysocki, 2013).

Uncontrolled games are those with random outcomes that are unpredictable, and this results in them becoming frustrating, tedious, and ultimately, unplayable (Wysocki, 2013).

How Hook, Line & Sinker integrates queer failure

Hook, Line & Sinker utilises failure and control as queer game concepts. It actualises failure as a frustrating, but not always negative outcome (Halberstam, 2011). It critiques control through a player's engagement inside a theologically educative world that is criticised using irony and humour, and from whose ideals the character Roe, increasingly disengages (Brandt

& Renata, 2024). Players experience situations that are realms of queer failure including being inadvertently outed, framed as errant or failing to enact avoidance.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter discusses the research design underpinning the project. Paradigmatically the study may be framed as research-enabled practice that utilised a heuristic inquiry that drew on my experience as a queer secondary school student. The project was developed using a range of methods including drawing, iterative experimentation, prototyping, polishing and eliciting informed feedback.

Research paradigm

A research paradigm describes a researcher's orientation. It draws on "a basic set of beliefs that guide action" (Guba, 1990, p. 17) and it affects the position adopted and methods employed in an inquiry.

In *Hook, Line & Sinkers*, the research paradigm may be broadly described as research-enabled practice (Batty & Zalipour, 2024). This paradigm accepts that there is a subjective relationship between the researcher and what is researched, and it maintains that research can be directed towards discovery through artistic practice and reflection on this practice (Klein, 2017; Mäkelä et al., 2014; Ventling, 2018).

Methodology

Methodologically the project can be described as a heuristic inquiry (Ings & Tudor, 2024; Moustakas, 1990; Ventling, 2018). Heuristic inquiry involves an "internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 9). Ventling maintains that heuristic inquiry's "adaptability in processes, and subjective personal viewpoint can make [it] attractive and relevant to the field of artistic research" (2018, p. 127). Heuristic inquiry is a useful methodology because of the project's emphasis on subjective knowing and discovery (in relation to my lived experiences of queer identity and social marginalisation). The flexible nature of a heuristic inquiry supports the iterative development of artistic thinking through diverse manifestations (Ings & Tudor, 2024) including in the instance of this project, the creative design of characters and video game environments that act as a visual, interactive realm for communicating the experience of queer marginalisation.

Methods

Structurally the project employed three phases:

- drawing (character development, environment design)
- physical worldbuilding
- prototyping (greyboxing, coding, bug fixing, and blocking out UI)

These phases interfaced with an ongoing process of strategically sourced feedback.

Drawing

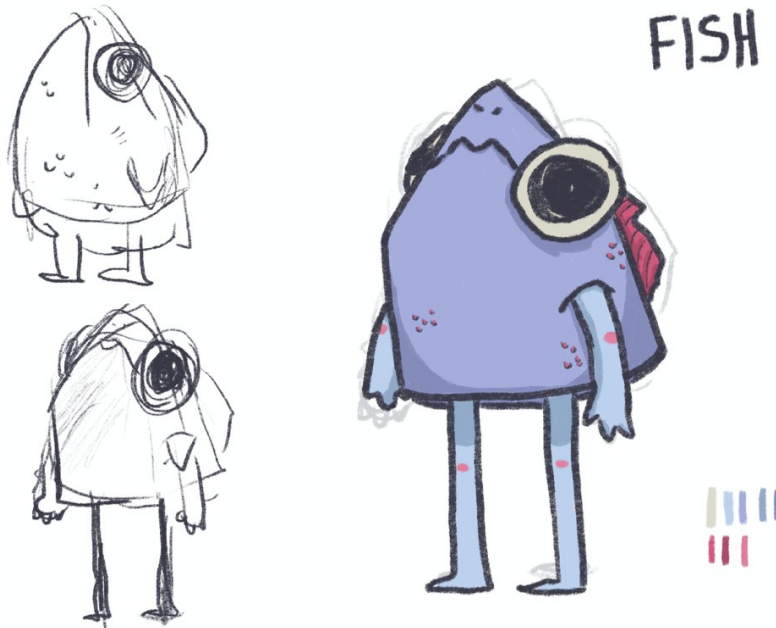
Drawing was used as a research tool throughout the project. Mäkelä, et al. (2014) note that drawing can be an exploratory, sense-making process where the observer and an idea are bound together in a material relationship.

In the development of *Hook, Line & Sinkers*, I used drawing to explore the design of environments and characters, based on my experiences of being queer in a theologically

driven educational space. The most notable example of this is the main playable character, Roe.

In my initial concept for the game, I imaged her as a protagonist (referred to as Fish). I sketched her as an anthropomorphised character that suggested being “a fish out of water” (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 Sketches of Roe (March, 2024)



Although I considered alternative designs, a queerly walking fish lent itself to diverse interpretations that I explored using a range of media, including ink, coloured pencils, digital illustration, and watercolour (Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2 Early watercolour paintings and coloured pencil sketches of fish (April, 2024)



The development of Roe led to an exploration of punning metaphors where fish were aligned with Roman Catholic symbolism. This resulted in characters like Father Fishfingers, and alternate fish like a Rainbow trout or Angel fish. Rats and humans were also designs initially explored but later rejected (Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3 Development sketches (April, 2024)



Physical worldbuilding

Physical worldbuilding is a method I used to progress the development of environmental designs. When drawing and ideating spaces in 2D, I often struggle to convey ideas and details (Figure 4.4). 2-dimensional thinking limits my ability to play with space and to imagine inside a physical depth where objects cast shadows and space is multilayered.

Figure 4.4 A potential environment; digital sketch (May, 2024)



However, using cardboard, paper, watercolour, and glue, I physically “built” a range of models that helped me to visualise my ideas (Figures 4.5, 4.6). Physically building and moulding these model environments enabled me to slow down, to consider space and depth—and reflect on the potentials of a built space (similar to a diorama or a stage set).

Figure 4.5 Pop-up diorama (May 2024)



Figure 4.6 Developed fish diorama (May, 2024)



The process of physical worldbuilding employs what Juhani Pallasmaa (2017) calls the “thinking hand”. He argues that some designers think differently when they engage with ideas in physical ways. He said, “The human body is a knowing entity [and] our entire being in the world is a sensuous and embodied mode of being, and this very sense of being is the ground of existential knowledge” (Pallasmaa, p. 100). Pallasmaa’s thinking may be aligned with proposals made by Marzotto (2009), McCauley (2004) and Odling-Smee (2002) who have discussed the concept of handmaking graphic elements as a process that enables designers to reach beyond thinking templates inherent in digital design.

By physically building environments I was able to iteratively develop ideas in ways that 2D visualising could not achieve. I found myself more thoughtful, more engaged and more open to the serendipitous. Physical modelling processes helped me to solidify ideas because they prompted questions like:

- Who else inhabits this space?
- What is this space used for?
- How would the player move through the depth and breadth of this space?

- What is the emotional feel of this space?
- Would NPCs (non-playable characters) interact with this space?
- What other items might we find in this space?

Once models were completed, I used them as a reference when 3D modelling game environments or when hand painting background environments and elements.

Prototyping

Design prototyping is an iterative method that involves trialling, failing and adapting, as well as proposing and verifying (Koskinen & Frens, 2017). Prototyping takes many forms, but in this study, the method involved greyboxing,¹² coding, bug fixing, and blocking out UI.

Eladhari and Ollila (2012) note that in iterative game prototyping, approaches may vary, from trailing functionality to responding data from end users (players of experimental versions of a game). Eladhari and Ollila also note that prototypes enable a designer to quickly test systems, mechanics, or UI and either integrate or discard what is discovered. Iterative cycles of prototyping and assessment can also be repeated through the testing of new systems, mechanics, or UI. This iterative process is also utilised when designing, editing, and implementing game assets and audio.

In developing prototypes, I used software like Unity,¹³ Photoshop,¹⁴ FL Studio,¹⁵ and FMOD.¹⁶ Once the basic structure and content of Hook, Line & Sinker was developed, I began to design the game's "feel" through refinements of sound,¹⁷ lighting, colour, scale, and animation.

Strategically sourced feedback

Throughout the project, I sought feedback by approaching individuals with expertise in specific areas. On the journey through the thesis, I was part of a small group of other queer researchers who were working on narrative-based projects. Some of us had experienced Catholic secondary education and we all understood social marginalisation. Feedback from this group helped me to assess my ideas against experiences and feelings that other queer students had encountered.

I also sought feedback from game theorists and queer activists, writers and filmmakers. These people helped me to expand my understanding of queer and game history, literature and religious iconography. This exposure prompted new ideas and autobiographical recollections were discussed and related to the wider queer experience. This helped me to enrich the content of the game.

I also sought feedback from colleagues regarding the game's functionality. Having other people play through (and break) the game and receive feedback from those unfamiliar with my project, helped me to address bugs in the design and assess the impact of the game on people with diverse levels of player experience.

¹² Greyboxing refers to the use of grey cubes or boxes as placeholders for game objects in the game engine. They allow the game designer to focus on other important elements such as pacing, level design, and core mechanics and systems (West, 2021).

¹³ Unity is the game engine I used to develop the project.

¹⁴ Photoshop enabled me to touch up any physically scanned watercolour artwork and edit it to use as 2D artwork or as textures in 3D models.

¹⁵ FL Studio enabled me to record and edit tracks to compose background music and SFX.

¹⁶ FMOD allowed me to control and edit the music and sound effects whilst working in Unity.

¹⁷ The sound design was developed in FL Studio.

Having now discussed the research design underpinning the project it is useful to unpack features of the game by providing a critical commentary on its structure and features.

CHAPTER FIVE: CRITICAL COMMENTARY

This chapter discusses the design of Hook, Line & Sinker. It unpacks distinctive features of the game and relates them to theory and interpretation associated with Roman Catholic iconography, character design and queer failure. It then discusses the game's structure, palette, watercolour treatment, use of illustrative naïveté and humour.

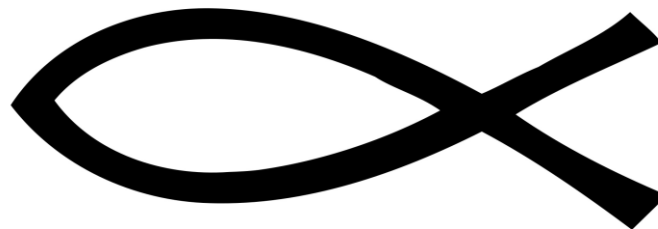
Roman Catholic iconography

Hook, Line & Sinker is permeated with Roman Catholic iconography. It occurs in institutional logos, characters' names, and the design of built environments. Indicative of this are thematic developments of ichthys (the fish) and the Christian cross.

Ichthys

The Greek word ichthys often used as an acronym for the phrase *Iesous Christos, Theou Yios, Soter*, meaning "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior" (Temperman, 2012, p. 43) (Figure 5.1).¹⁸

Figure 5.1 The ichthys (or ichthus)



Rasmus (2012) notes that there is no generally accepted origin of the symbol although previously popular interpretations "include the fish as a secret symbol for persecuted Christians or as a symbol for Christ mystically sacrificed in the Eucharist." (p. 328).

Temperman (2012) observes that transgressive variations of the ichthys symbol can include feet on the fish and the inscription, Darwin, inside the fish's body. Other adaptations reference the devil and death or food-related matters. These adaptations, he suggests, may be interpreted as humorous, critical, or mocking in tone.

Hook, Line & Sinker incorporates a number of ironic allusions to ichthys. The students study at an institution called Ikthys College¹⁹. This name alludes both the school's Christian character and a word play; students studying in formal educational are housed in institutions called schools, school is also collective noun for fish. The school's logo features fish jammed into a

¹⁸ Rasmus (2012) notes that *Ichthys* or *ΙΧΘΥΣ* is drawn from the initial letters of *Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior: Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ Υἱὸς Σωτὴρ*.

¹⁹ Two different spellings of ichthys are used throughout the exegesis. *Ichthys* refers to the Roman Catholic icon, and *Ikthys* refers to the fictional school.

sardine can and in the game, characters like the Advocate refer to the girls as “sprats” and describe Hell as an “eternal fish market.”

From a broader perspective, fish[ing] is associated with the idea of Christian recruitment. In this regard, Temperman (2012) notes Christ's invitation in Matthew for his first disciples Simon, Peter and Andrew to become “fishers of men.”²⁰

Beyond these biblical references, in a queer reading, the word fish in Polari (the underground language of gay men) refers to women (Baker, 2002; Cage, 2003; Ings, 2007, 2012). Rogers (1972) notes that in prison slang, fish may also describe a recently sentenced prisoner.

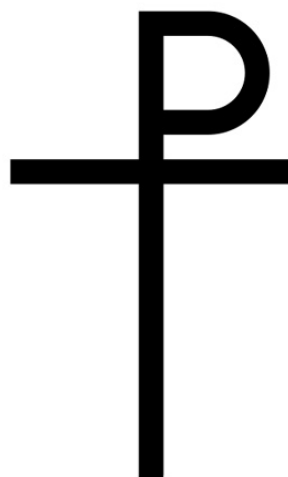
The Cross

The cross is a widely recognised Christian symbol that represents eternal life, redemption and resurrection through faith.²¹ As a religious sign it may appear on the walls and steeples of churches or be worn as jewellery around the neck. Ritually, for some Roman Catholics, during the beginning of Lent, the cross is also marked on one's forehead in ash (Shisley, 2025).

Shisley (para. 13) notes the appearance of the word “cross” in each of the Synoptic Gospels when they recount “that at the moment of Jesus's deepest agony as he hung on the cross, the soldiers and people in the crowd mocked him, saying, “Save yourself, and come down from the cross!” (Mark 15:30; Matthew 27:40–44; Luke 23:37–39).”

This observation noted, Hurtado (2013) observes that the symbol of the cross was not in wide use in the early church until the 4th century when it appeared in iconography on papyrus manuscripts as the Staurogram (the shape of a cross “made by the overlapping the Greek letters Rho and Tau.” (Shisley, 2025, para. 19) (Figure 5.3)

Figure 5.2 The Staurogram



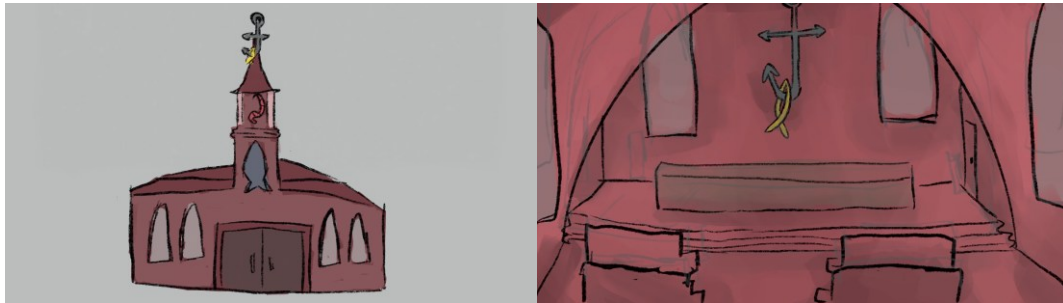
²⁰ “And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” (*Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition* [RSVCE], 2006, Matthew 4:19). The metaphor of fishing for followers is also featured in the Gospel of Mark (Mark 1:17).

²¹ I use the word cross in this exegesis as a symbol that may be differentiated from a crucifix. The crucifix generally refers to a cross containing an image of the body of Christ (Bradshaw, 2002).

Note. The staurogram ligature was used as a graphic composite to abbreviate *stauros* (σταυρός), the Greek word for cross (Hurtado, 2006).

In *Hook, Line & Sinker* the cross is a signifier of Christian affiliation but in the game's world, I add a hook to it and integrate it with built environments. Thus, we see a cross on the steeple of the church or hanging on the back wall of the building's interior (Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3 Images of the cross on the church; exterior and interior shot



This adapted cross also appears as a “cruci-fish” around Sister Scallop’s neck.²²

Figure 5.4 Cruci-fish worn by Sister Scallop



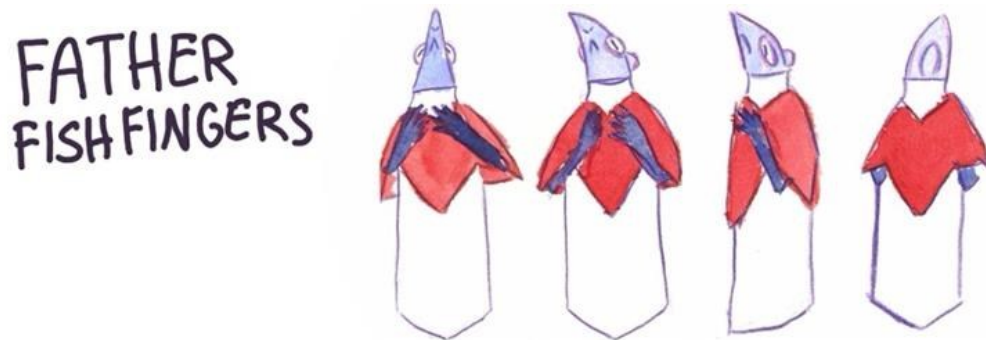
Character design

The design and naming of characters in *Hook, Line and Sinker* employs irony to suggest that there are things implicit in each character that might not be evident on the surface.

²² This symbol is discussed in more detail in the subsection Character design.

Father Fishfingers

Figure 5.5 Father Fishfingers



Father Fishfingers is dressed in a mozzetta, the short cape worn over the shoulders of a cardinal and buttoned down the front. (In the design I have removed the traditional 12 silk-covered buttons that are said to represent the Disciples). The character also wears a white linen rochet; the garment of jurisdiction, derived from the alb, “the long white linen tunic worn by Christ before his Passion, a garment of purity and sacrifice” (Goh, 2022, para. 5).

While Father Fishfinger’s attire may reference purity and sacrifice, his name belies the inference. He is a visual manifestation of abuse in the Catholic Church. His creepy, elongated fingers hint at sexual and physical exploitation by clerical staff but his hands are gloved. (Traditionally a cardinal’s hands are not gloved). The hiding of his hands is a reference to the church’s preparedness not to “touch” or “handle” instances of complaint related to sexual abuse. This idea is repeated in his pose which insistently turns away from direct address.

Abuse in the Catholic Church has been discussed by many scholars (Faggioli & Harris, 2024; Frawley-O’Dea, 2007; Hürten et al., 2025; Niebauer, 2023). Historical instances have included the abuse of boys and girls, some as young as three years old, with the majority between the ages of 11 and 14 (Lattin, 1998; Report of the New Zealand Royal Commission, 1900; Stephens, 2011).

Faggioli and Harris (2024) note that across the last forty years, clerical child sexual abuse (cCSA) cases have dominated investigations in the Catholic Church. In New Zealand, the Royal Commission of Inquiry (2024) records that in the period between 1950–2000, the Catholic Church had the highest rate of abuse among the various faith-based institutions investigated during their inquiry (totalling 1,122 individual reports). Almost half of reported abuse incidents involved sexual harm (The Royal Commission of Inquiry, 2024). Te Rōpū Tautoko (2022) notes that of those 1,122 reports, 387 were made against clergy (totalling 182 respondents or 14% of all clergy over that period of time.)

It is estimated that between 53,000 and 106,000 people may have been abused in New Zealand faith-based care settings between 1950 and 2000 (The Royal Commission of Inquiry, 2024).

The Advocate

Figure 5.6 The Advocate



In *Hook, Line & Sinker*, the Advocate is a visual characterisation of the Roman Catholic archetype of womanhood. This ideal is articulated in Pope Francis' encyclical *Vultum Dei Quaerere: On women's contemplative life* (2016) that describes a woman as a "contemplative sister", who is self-giving and self-sacrificing in her endeavour to bring the good news of the Gospel.

He states,

It is not easy for the world, or at least that large part of it dominated by the mindset of power, wealth and consumerism, to understand your particular vocation and your hidden mission; and yet it needs them immensely. The world needs you every bit as much as a sailor on the high seas needs a beacon to guide him to a safe haven. Be beacons to those near to you and, above all, to those far away. Be torches to guide men and women along their journey through the dark night of time. (2016, p. 8)

In the encyclical, Francis (2016) notes the importance of women responding to Christ by offering their entire life to him, living in him, and for him. He uses Jesus' mother Mary as an example.

The Roman Catholic archetype of womanhood is often associated with guiding, nurturing, giving, and self-sacrifice. In *Hook, Line & Sinker*, on the surface the Advocate guides the young sprats, Roe, Angel, and Krill towards religiosity. However, her character design is intentionally paradoxical. While she is attired in a twin-set and pearls, she is a shark with serrated teeth and a fin protruding from her back. She appears benign but she is capable of tearing you apart. In the game's fictionalised interpretation of the Catholic School system, an advocate's role is to uphold a school's Catholic identity and value, while enhancing the wellbeing and needs of students by ensuring that their concerns are heard, and their rights are protected. However, under the surface, an advocate may also be an enforcer of identity because her beliefs can determine students' access to mental health and LGBTQIA+ centred resources. In the culture of the game, she measures each student's value as a young woman against the institution's values and becomes both an identity adjudicator and reinforcer of continued religiosity.

In my experience, Catholic schools promote the Advocate's archetype as the ideal of femininity that young women should strive for. We are taught to be gendered but sexless.

Our bodies are described to us as vessels for Jesus, for God's message. (Our bodies are not our own.)²³

Sister Scallop

Figure 5.7 Sister Scallop



Sister Scallop is encased in a shell. Her name references various species of marine bivalve molluscs in the taxonomic family Pectinidae. Her silhouette forms an arrow, pointing up to God. Her habit encases her whole body. It comprises a tunic, veil, and headpiece (wimple). I designed her to most closely resemble a Franciscan nun (these women usually wear brown or grey habits, representing poverty and simplicity).²⁴ Although Sister Scallop doesn't wear a cincture (belt – symbolizing the vow of chastity and self-discipline) she is adorned with a peculiar rosary (referred to as a cruci-fish in the game).

The cruci-fish is a graphic element that fuses a cross with a fishhook. It hangs from Sister Scallop's neck and adorns the cover of the school's bible (Figure 5.8). The design alludes to the ideology of fishing – the practice of catching, reeling in and aligning student's emerging identities with religious values.

Figure 5.8 Cruci-fish graphic



²³ I cannot emphasise enough the negative impact that the separation of my personhood from my body had on my adolescent, and adult self. It has taken me five years since leaving school to recognise myself in the mirror again.

²⁴ Teaching is a common ministry in the Franciscan tradition.

Although we see Sister Scallop as a fisher for ideological alignment, her unconventionally pale lavender costume is in fact a subtle nod to her (closeted) queerness and more broadly, to “queer reading”.²⁵

Prager (2020) notes that the word lavender has been used to denote queerness since the 1920s and the term is now used alongside rainbow to mean LGBTQIA+.²⁶ However, the use of lavender in Sister Scallop’s habit also alludes to *The Lavender Menace*, a group of lesbian feminist activists who were described by the feminist author Betty Friedan in the middle of last century, as a negative, undermining agency in the women’s movement. Friedan’s anxiety and framing of lavender lesbian women, led to their exclusion and the rejection of lesbian issues from the Second Congress to Unite Women in New York City in May 1970 (Medhurst, 2021; Jay, 2019). Sister Scallop’s lavender habit is pale and washed out, it passes in the world of catholic education because she is prepared to remain hidden in plain sight. In *Hook Line & Sinker*, Sister Scallop takes on the role of a witness. She dislikes how queer students are treated, but she will do nothing; she watches from afar, using her religious beliefs to justify why it is better to hide queerness, rather than be open and accepting of oneself (and supportive of others).

Roe

Figure 5.9 Roe



Roe is the main playable character in *Hook, Line & Sinker*. Her design was the longest in development. Based on the Bluefish (*Pomatomus saltatrix*),²⁷ Roe epitomises the anxious queer student who is afraid of being outed.

Her character design incorporates small acts of defiance in the form of brightly, unnaturally coloured fins (hair)—a cautious push back against the strict grooming standards enforced at Catholic schools. She also displays pens in her blazer pocket that are arranged by colour to resemble the lesbian flag. These signifiers operate as a subtle identifier that other queer students might recognise, but they are inconspicuous enough that they can fly under the radar (compared to more overt features, such as rainbow pins attached to the lapel of a blazer).

²⁵ Queer reading refers to subtext that may be read as queer. The term has origins in queer theory of the late 1980s through the 1990s. The term queer reading has been applied to literature, film and diverse forms of media (Barker & Scheele, 2016).

²⁶Johnstone (2023, para. 23) notes that “after the communist Red Scare in the 1940s and 50s, the USA went through a similar but lesser-known period of history called the Lavender Scare, where homosexual people throughout American society were ousted from government jobs due to their perceived communist sympathies.”

²⁷ Within New Zealand and Australia, the bluefish is also known as the tailor or tailor fish.

The stripes on Roe's clothing (and those of the other students) are a nod to the symbol of stripes of prison uniforms. Although these have their origin in the Auburn system (an American method of the 19th century incarceration in which prisoners worked during the day but were kept in silent, solitary confinement at night), in the game they allude to educational spaces that can be experienced as a form of prison that is heavily monitored and inescapable.

Roe, Krill, and Angel's blazers also reference the hierarchy of age distinction in schools. Webster (2008) notes how such distinctions are featured in school uniforms to differentiate senior students, particularly those in Year 12 and Year 13, from junior students.²⁸ In contemporary New Zealand secondary schools, age distinctions are still common.²⁹

In a queer reading the uniform alludes to the vertically striped clothing that queer men, incarcerated and killed in the Nazi concentration camps during World War II were forced to wear (Figure 5.10).

Figure 5.10 Gay prisoners at Sachsenhausen concentration camp, Germany; wearing pink triangles on their striped uniforms (1938)



Note: Image courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration (540175). Used with permission.

²⁸ Age distinctions for girls in the 1940s, reappeared in uniform designs in the 1960s. Webster (2008) suggests that this differentiation may have accompanied other strategies employed to retain girls in secondary education.

²⁹ In my case, it was a combination of elements such as a blazer from Year 11 onwards, a light coloured, short sleeved blouse from Year 12 onwards, a tie (and an optional vest) that was expected to be worn in Year 13.

Krill

Figure 5.11 Krill



Krill, in *Hook, Line & Sinker*, represents the expressive, rebellious, openly queer counterpart of Roe. Her design is loosely based on the Murray River rainbow fish. She demonstrates intentional disobedience through her damage of, and modifications to, the school's uniform. McSharry et al. (2023) note that in Catholic school uniforms, elements like starched collars, stiff ties, woollen jumpers, and long pleated skirts are often thought of as products of the Catholic Church's control and influence, which force bodies into a state of conservative conformity.

In contrast, the bottom of Krill's blazer is poorly cropped, and her sleeves are messily rolled up. Her appearance shows a defiant disregard for the school's expected standards of well-kept, presentable uniformity. Krill epitomises defiant queer failure to conform with expected standards and she integrates this failure as a mark of pride and asserted identity.

Angel

Figure 5.12 Angel



Angel is based on the golden angelfish. She is the angelic Catholic student whose demeanour and behaviour makes her an institutionally approved role model. In reference to an ideal I sought to epitomise while I was at school, her name makes subtle reference to my own name (the feminine form of the angel Gabriel).

Angel has two fins, one at the top of her head, and one lower down her back. They often glow like halos. She carries a bible to indicate her faithfulness, conformity and reverence. She epitomises the good student, who Melanie Janzen (2009, p. 93) says "obeys, completes tasks, masters presented knowledge, and performs being a 'student' in an appropriate way."

Having now discussed the character design used to imbue the game with deeper reading, it is useful to unpack how *Hook Line & Sinker* manifests queer failure.

Queer failure

The dynamics of the game is built on the concept of queer failure within a fictional Catholic school called Ikhthus College.

Takemoto (2016) notes that queer failure can engage emotional dimensions of loss, failure, disappointment and shame. However, queer failure can also be a form of resistance. Halberstam (2011) argues that queer failure encompasses ways of thinking and existing that lie outside of conventional understandings of success, it encourages the acceptance and revelling in one's failures to find the absurdity, silliness and joy in rejecting societal norms through merely existing. Queer failure can operate as a conscious, political rejection of heteronormative values and the adopting of failed compliance can be an expression of conscious queer identity.³⁰

Hook, Line & Sinker offers discourse through play, by forcing a player to fail, to observe failure, and to struggle in a religiously defined environment that forces queer failure through anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric. At Ikhthus College a player has no power to change their ideology or to leave the school grounds.

Avoidance

As a queer player in the world of Ikhthus College, it is impossible to completely hide your identity (trying is futile). As a result, there are punitive consequences that one encounters throughout the game. An indicative example occurs in the Mass cutscene (Figure 5.13). Here, as Father Fishfingers delivers his Homily, we hear Roe's phone go off, her ringtone is Pink Pony Club.³¹ She is immediately identified as not only disobedient (by having her phone on), but also exposed by the nature of the ringtone, Roe is taken out of the room to be disciplined by the Advocate.

Figure 5.13 The Mass cutscene where Roe's phone goes off



³⁰ Thus, in the character design of students there is conscious, displayed failure among queer students to display conformity.

³¹ For an explanation of this ring tone see the discussion under overt and covert humour.

Queer failure as defiance

Queer failure also punctuates the game with instances of transgression as queer failure/resistance against the homophobia and heteronormative expectations of the college. While this is visually manifest in Krill's attire and manner, it is also evident in dialogue (Figure 5.14).

Figure 5.14 In-game dialogue between Sister Scallop and Roe

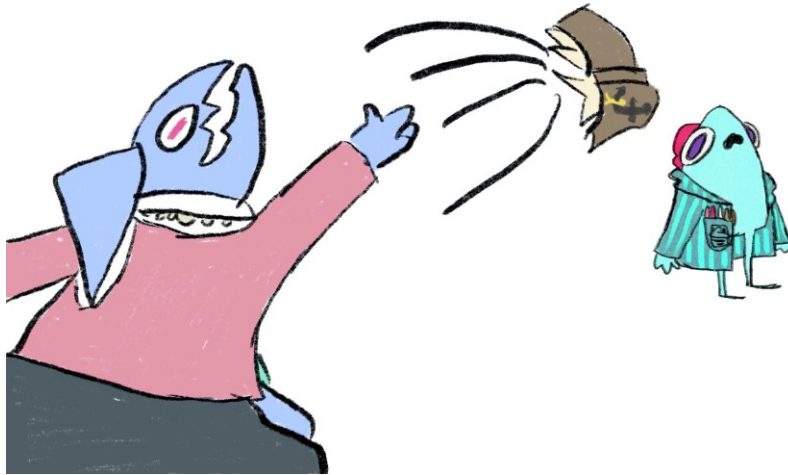


In an incident when Roe lines up with the other student volunteers to help set up for Mass, Sister Scallop tells her to remove the coloured pens from her blazer pocket. (These are arranged in the colour order of the lesbian pride flag and the encounter suggests that Sister Scallop, being read as a closeted teacher, may recognise this.) When Roe refuses, the nun threatens to send her to the Advocate's office to be dealt with. Roe removes the pens to placate Sister Scallop. This said, once Sister Scallop turns her back, Roe puts the pens back in her blazer pocket.

Failure to stand up to school authority

At school it can be very difficult to assert your queer identity inside a system that is deeply empowered and contains heteronormative structures that are entrenched and reinforced. Thus, sometimes a form of prescribed queer failure becomes evident when you are unable to stand up against the authority of the school. In Hook Line & Sinker this kind of failure is evident in the episode after Roe is pulled out of Mass. The Advocate admonishes her, telling Roe that she is a disappointment, and has failed to live up to (the heteronormative) standards of behaviour expected by the college. When Roe attempts to defend herself (Figure 5.15), the Advocate throws a bible at her and an argument (that the student can't win) ensues.

Figure 5.15 In-game screenshot; the Advocate disciplining Roe



Game Design

Having considered the nature of queer failure in *Hook, Line & Sinker*, it is useful to discuss five features of game design:

- the game's structure
- colour palette
- the use of watercolour characters and environments
- naïveté
- the integration of overt and covert humour

The game's structure

Initially, I had intended to create a nonlinear narrative for the game that would allow a player to explore and progress through the world as they liked (Shepard, 2014). However, it was conceded that a smaller, linear scope offered a clearer, more condensed exploration of oppression and failure. Accordingly, I designed the game as a linear narrative that moves in a straight line, forcing players to complete one objective fully before moving onto another. Linear game narratives have a concrete start, middle and end, and generally streamline themes and emotions for all players (Shepard).

In *Hook, Line & Sinker*, the player enters the world of Ikhtus College through an exterior view of the buildings. The player takes control to play as Roe and they are met by Krill (who addresses them directly and explains the world and nature of the game). From this point we follow a linear narrative. Roe meets at the chapel for Mass, is reprimanded for wearing pens in her pocket, sets up the confessional booth and talks about a dating rumour with Krill. She is pulled out of Mass by the Advocate because her phone rings. Roe is then disciplined by the Advocate.

Along the way, relationships Roe has with other students and the school's hierarchy unfold. Because the game is a proof of concept, when development funding is secured, additional content will be incorporated into the narrative. As it stands, the design indicates the visual nature of the world, its core characters and indicative instances of conflict.

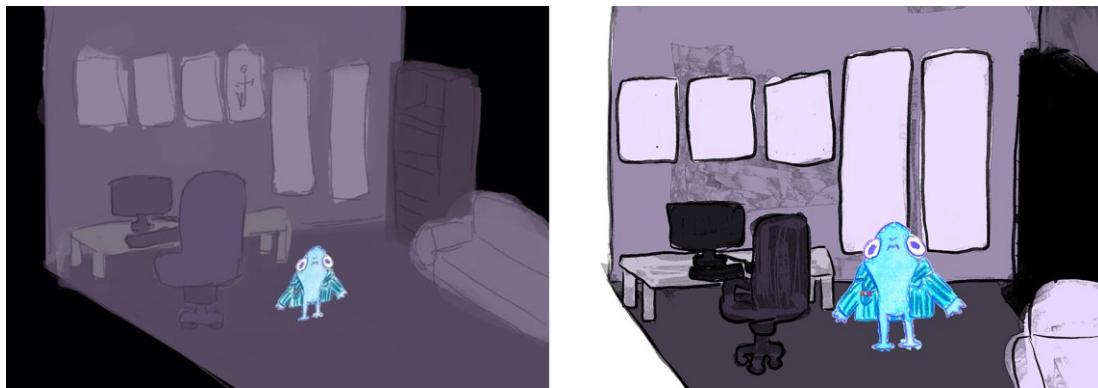
Colour palette

The use of colour in Hook Line & Sinker differentiates characters from the background artwork. To heighten this demarcation, I have designed brighter colours for the three student characters (Roe, Krill, and Angel) in contrast to the pastel or darker (but still saturated) colour palettes used for Father Fishfingers, The Advocate and Sister Scallop.

For Ikhthus College I created a desaturated monochromatic colour scheme that emphasises environmental conformity but also enables each of the characters to stand out.³²

To add anxiety to the backgrounds and emphasise the conflict between the player and their context, I applied fresco filters across the original paintings, so texture was elevated, lines became more brutal, and contrast was emphasised (Figure 5.16).

Figure 5.16 Digitally painted background; before and after the application of a Photoshop fresco filter



Note. Early illustration of the Advocate's office, compared to a later treatment that heightens tension in the illustrative style.

The use of watercolour characters and environments

The world of Hook, Line & Sinker was initially rendered as a watercolour environment that contains hand painted characters and backgrounds that have been digitally modified using textured brushes.

The use of watercolour was more than an aesthetic choice. I wanted to create a game that had the feel of a hand-painted children's picture book. This seeming innocence I believed might serve as a form of irony; a paradoxical juxtaposition realised as a tension between cutesy character designs and the darker – more anxious, thematic content of the game.

Naïveté

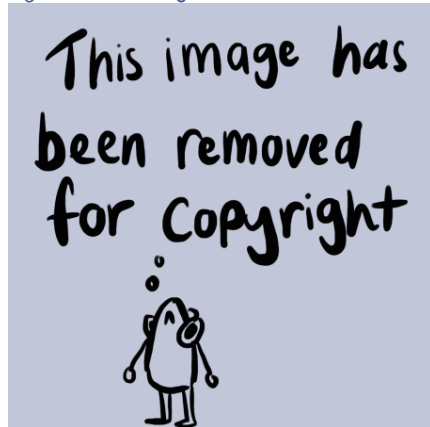
As an extension of this idea, Hook, Line & Sinker utilises naïve character and environment depictions to discuss sophisticated topics (like LGBTQIA+ experiences, abuses of power, and the impact on identity construction by theologically driven education).

The use of naïve depictions to convey sophisticated topics can be observed in a range of media, including the television series *Strange Planet* (2023), the animated television series *Steven Universe* (2013–2019) and the interactive omnibus animation, *Five Years Old Memories* (2024).

³² Geslin et al. (2016) note that darker and desaturated colours can impact the emotions a player experiences, and that darker or desaturated colours can influence a player's negative emotions, such as sadness.

Strange Planet (2023) was originally a webcomic created by Nathan W. Pyle, but it was later adapted into a 10-episode animated series by Apple TV+. The series follows a society of blue aliens as they explore the absurdity and nuances of existence and attempt to understand the complexities of human traits. Pyle uses these aliens to humorously make astute observations about society and the strange behaviours of human beings. The work uses apparent naïveté to consider themes of sincerity, love, loneliness, mortality, and self-discovery (Figure 5.17).

Figure 5.17 Strange Planet Promotional Poster for Apple TV+ (2023)



Steven Universe (2013–2019) follows a young, half-crystal alien boy (and the show's namesake) through the trials and tribulations of growing up. Steven Universe uses naïveté to discuss topics like mental health, LGBTQIA+ relationships,³³ the importance of healthy interpersonal relationships, war, abuse, loss, acceptance, family, and diversity. The work is targeted at a young demographic and the art style is bright and welcoming (Figure 5.18). The show features stories of adventure interspersed with fantasy elements that intrigue younger audiences. At the same time the narrative incorporates darker, complicated themes (like a war between the alien gems), conflicts, jealousy and Steven's struggle to understand and accept his alien heritage and powers.

Figure 5.18 Steven Universe promotional poster for Cartoon Network, Rebecca Sugar (2013)



³³ *Steven Universe* (2013–2019) was the first piece of media I saw as a child that depicted queer people and queer relationships.

Five Years Old Memories (2024) created by Komitsu Fujihata, is a short documentary~esque game that reimagines old CD-ROM software inside the digital era. The interactive animation employs naïve childlike artwork to discuss and explore the childhood memories of seven interviewees. The game focuses on childhood memories, told through the child's eyes. The game prompts the player to reframe melancholy, and upsetting memories. By doing this, it encourages a new sense of hopefulness even when things don't look positive.

Figure 5.19 Screenshot from Five Years Old Memories (2024)



Strange Planet, Steven Universe and Five Years Old Memories, all utilise naïve artistic depictions to convey and discuss complicated or difficult ideas. In Hook, Line & Sinker, naïve depiction is a form of irony – a paradox that is both humorous and unsettling. The imagery (albeit complex) looks like something a child might have drawn on their sketch pad (Figure 5.19). Naïve depiction accompanies us through a world that purports to be innocent but inside which, queer innocence pays a price for not being able to manage a heteronormative and punishing power structure. The world of Ikhtus College espouses values of care and inclusiveness, but queer equivalents of these values are monitored, regulated and punished.

Overt and covert humour

In constructing its narrative of identity oppression, Hook Line & Sinker integrates both overt and covert humour in sophisticated ways.

Overt references

We see overt humour operating visually in designs like the Ikhtus College logo. This graphic depicts a tightly packed tin of fish (alluding to the stifling, compressed environment of the school). The contrast between the fish references the contrast between visibly queer students and their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts. In the world of Catholic education, “out” queer students are identified and watched closely, while being forced to fit in the same straight sized boxes as their peers (Figure 5.20). The inclusion of the Latin phrase Audi Vide Tace in the logo translates as “Hear, See, Be Silent.”

Figure 5.20 Ikhtus College logo



In Hook, Line and Sinker, we also encounter overt humour in the naming of characters and in dialogue shared between them. The use of scripture is a case in point. Throughout the Advocate's dialogue (after pulling Roe out of Mass to chastise her), this woman enacts Catholic guidance by quoting selected verses from scripture (Figure 5.21).

Figure 5.21 The Advocate's dialogue containing quotes from scripture



Metaphorically she is throwing the book at Roe, but in the game, this act is rendered as physical. Materially, throwing bibles is a humorous nod to the term Bible bashing (the confrontational manner in which individuals and institutions may attempt to establish and reinforce their values).³⁴ In the game, instead of one book we see many – a manifestation of the numerous quotes cherry-picked from the scriptures that queer people encounter as admonitions against their sexuality.³⁵

³⁴ See <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/bible-basher>

³⁵ This physical bible throwing is fictional and not based on the behaviour or actions of individuals within the schools and parishes I formerly attended.

Leviticus 18:22;³⁶ 20:13;³⁷ 1 Kings 14:24;³⁸ Romans 1;26-27;³⁹ and 1 Corinthians 6:9⁴⁰ are the most commonly quoted of these texts. They ornament sermons from the pulpit and the advice of individuals who use scripture to justify a belief that queerness is a sin, that queer people are sinners and (in the rhetoric of the Advocate) queers must repent before they can enter Fish Heaven. If a sprat refuses to adopt a heteronormative identity, as punishment, she will be banished to the eternal fish market—Hook, Line & Sinker’s interpretation of Hell.

Covert references

However, in addition to the explicit, Hook, Line & Sinker also employs instances of covert queer readings that may only be evident to some players. While references to the colour lavender, striped uniforms and the Polari word, fish, have already been discussed, there are other examples. Narratively an instance occurs when Roe is sprung as queer when her phone’s ringtone plays Chappell Roan’s Pink Pony Club (2020). Over the last two years, Chappell Roan has become a well-known recognisable, queer pop icon (after the release and virality of her 2023 album *Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess*).⁴¹

Pink Pony Club is used as Roe’s ringtone as a nod to her queerness, understood by those familiar with lesbian musician Chappell Roan.

However, there are also covert references that will be identifiable to queer and non queer students who have experienced a Catholic education. These are the ubiquitous statements I encountered growing up, like calling people “living gospels,” describing individuals as being “made in the image of God, being beautifully and wonderfully made,” and the claim that Ikhtus College is made up of “feminine, faithful, God honouring Catholic women.” Even years after leaving, I still cannot separate some words from certain phrases (for example, “Let’s begin” from “Let’s begin with the sign of the cross”). Recognisable phrasing in the game also includes heavily gendering statements and anti-LGBTQIA+ admonishments that equate sexual expression with sin, debauchery or abomination.

In his book *The Mysterious Stranger and other Curious Tales*, Mark Twain noted “Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand” (Twain, 1916/2005, p. 187). I sometimes imagine he

³⁶ [2] “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” (*Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition* [RSVCE], 2006, Leviticus 18:22).

³⁷ “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.” (*Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition* [RSVCE], 2006, Leviticus 20:13).

³⁸[24] “and there were also male cult prostitutes in the land. They did according to all the abominations of the nations which the Lord drove out before the people of Israel.” (*Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition* [RSVCE], 2006, 1 Kings 14:24).

³⁹ [26] “For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, [27] and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.” (*Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition* [RSVCE], 2006, Romans 1: 26-27).

⁴⁰ [9] “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals” (*Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition* [RSVCE], 2006, 1 Corinthians 6:9).

⁴¹ Although *Pink Pony Club* was originally released in 2020, it was rereleased on this album, gaining recognition alongside hits such as *Good Luck, Babe!*, *My Kink is Karma*, and *Casual*.

was referring to the political and social power of humour, the agency of irony, and the potential of witty or droll allusion to question ideological authority.

Secondary schools can be very difficult places for queer kids. You can find yourself isolated and afraid at a time in your life when your identity is transforming and developing with unexpected velocity. In the face of opposition sometimes you have very little with which to defend yourself. I have used humour as a deliberate device in this game. It is paradoxical, as is the naïve treatment of the world of Ikhthus College. But humour as naïve raiment, can also be armour. It can be a defence and an arm around the shoulder of students who currently navigate a Roman Catholic education – and who like me, turn to video games for respite.

CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Nigerian poet Ben Okri (1996, p. 121) said, “Stories are always a form of resistance.” This thesis applies his claim to the authoring and design of a narrative video game.

Perspective

The purpose of the project has been to highlight harmful actions experienced by queer people in certain religious educational spaces and to critique the ignorance of institutions that allow such damage to occur. This said, neither *Hook, Line & Sinker* nor this exegesis constitute an attack on individuals, beliefs, or the Catholic schools I attended.

I created *Ikhthus College* as a generic space, so it might apply to many educational environments. The game uses archetypes, familiar elements and circumstances that are not unique to a specific secondary school. I have been careful to do this because, beyond trauma, I also experienced some successful aspects of a Catholic education system. *Hook, Line & Sinker* neither reflects nor focuses on the strong sense of community and the support I experienced from some wonderful, compassionate, teachers. Especially in the art classrooms, I received a unique kind of education that did not connect religiosity to creativity and care. In this space I remember light streaming through tinted windows and experiencing an escape from the loud, and at times, oppressive aspects of the school environment.

Summary

This thesis has investigated how naïvely illustrated artwork, humour and queer reading can be employed to visualise LGBTQIA+ identity and experiences in a narrative-driven video game. Drawing on my experiences as a queer adolescent who navigated a religious secondary school education, the project has explored the nature of queer failure. Adopting a heuristic methodology which incorporated iterative design and auto-biographic elements I have sought to draw on lived experience and embed it inside the design of a fictional world.

Contributions to the field

The project offers three contributions to knowledge.

First, the study contributes to existing discourses surrounding queer failure (Halberstam, 2011; Mica et al., 2022; Takemoto, 2016) by demonstrating how such failure can be expressed within a video game experience. In so doing, the project extends theoretical studies by applying queer failure to game conception and mechanics. Thus, what is largely a theorised condition has been applied to a designed, immersive gaming experience.

The project also translates an encounter with religious education into constructed characters who manifest dimensions of queer experience in schools (closeted teachers, out students, students struggling with their identities, and authority figures who manifest veiled threat or enacted homophobia). In doing so, the game provides a counter-discourse to heteronormative constructions of religious secondary schooling through its overt exploration of queerness and institutional oppression that can surround it.

Finally, the project demonstrates how overt and covert allusion can operate inside the same narrative space, allowing for queer and Catholic readings of layers of information. Using paradox as an agent, this approach counterpoints naïve illustration with complex content, and religiosity with secular analysis.

Presentations

Across the 18 months of the thesis' development I have publicly presented formal and informal iterations of the project. The most recent presentation (in March 2025) was to incoming thesis candidates in the Master of Design. Here I discussed the evolution of the research question and methods and devices I utilised or adapted in exploring visual and narrative aspects of the game.

Further research

Hook Line & Sinkers⁴² is the first step in a larger project. It is a proof of concept that establishes characters, an environment and a form of humour that, in conjunction with a distinctive illustrative style, positions the project in such a way that I can begin seeking external funding for further development. This support will enable me to develop additional content that will include some positive experiences (nonfailure based), set against more explicit content about ideological and physical abuse within a theologically controlled educative space.

However, regardless of funding, I aim to publish Hook, Line & Sinkers.⁴³

I am also considering advancing the study into a practice-led doctoral thesis that expands the potential of game design as a vehicle for critiquing religious education (and the impact it can have on queer adolescents). Within this, I am particularly interested in the potentials of game structure, irony, naïveté and humour as devices for making more accessible, ideas, insights and experiences that might otherwise remain obscure or hidden.

In closing

My journey through this thesis has been one of growth. I was genuinely afraid to explore queerness in a religious educational space and I believed that it was dangerous to turn around and face the religion I had left behind (religion that had been a huge part of my identity formation into adulthood).

I have used humour to deal with trauma, knitting it together with the disconnection from my peers and loneliness that I felt inside my secondary schooling. I have “played” with my own fear, manoeuvring courage through naïve visuals to create an interactive digital experience.

This project has allowed me to critically question my thinking through the lenses of queer theory and queer game design (the latter of which I had little idea existed).

I have learnt to reframe my failure into something positive.

⁴² I intentionally designed *Hook, Line & Sinkers* with user friendliness in mind, so regardless of a player's lack of experience with video games, they can pick up and play the game. *Hook, Line & Sinkers* acts as an accessible barrier of entry to video games.

⁴³ I am emboldened by Anna Antrophy's solo, indie creation *Dys4ia* (2012). She developed this using the free, open-source tool *Twine*, that Ellison (2013) notes has enabled marginalised game developers to extend stories with variables, conditional logic, images, CSS, and JavaScript.

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