Cyborg Games: Videogame Blasphemy and Disorientation

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Abstract

This paper describes the genre of "cyborg games," using examples of independent videogames (such as *Gone Home*) to illustrate the genre, as well as AAA mainstream games (such as *Mass Effect*) to describe the genre's limits. After defining key terms (cyborg, blasphemy, and disorientation), the paper offers a close reading of two of Anna Anthropy's games, *dys4ia* and *Defend the Land*. These close readings show how cyborg games are disorienting to normative bodies, and why those moments of disorientation are necessarily jarring for normative players.

Author Keywords

Queer; cyborg; disorientation; Donna Haraway; Sara Ahmed; Anna Anthropy; Gone Home; Mass Effect; #gamergate; indie gaming; gaming culture

Cyborg Games

My intention with this paper is not to define the boundaries, or to describe the limits of a genre, but rather to set out a kind of "fuzzy set"[1] of what I've been calling *cyborg games*. Cyborg games create spaces where normative players, or people who have always been invited into game worlds, are confronted with a space they don't fit into. Games like Anna Anthropy's *dys4ia* (2012) and *Defend the Land* (2011), and The Fullbright Company's *Gone Home* (2013), among others, fit into this fuzzy set. It is appropriate, somehow, to borrow this term from scholars of fantasy (who, themselves, borrowed it from mathematics), because just as fantasy is kind of the unwanted younger (yet, ironically older) sibling of science fiction, cyborg games have faced hostile resistance in the larger gaming culture. Particularly, the clash between so-called Social Justice Warriors (SJWs) (people who believe that there is room for feminist critiques, race awareness, and social activism in games) and #gamergaters (people who believe their culture is threatened by an increased critical eye), has made it clear that whatever mainstream gaming culture is, it is threatened by and hostile to games and players who question the supremacy of shooters, white male leads, and the assumption of heterosexuality (Vossen, 2014). Mary Flanagan (2009) and Rita Raley (2009) argue that people have been "ruining games" for centuries by making games that, beautifully and paradoxically, aren't *really* games. *Really* games are, of course, a moving goal-post meant to delegitimize anyone who makes a game that critiques, that questions. However, I believe that the resistance to cyborg games doesn't only stem from the way those games invite critical play. Rather, the resistance is a response to the discomfort of being disoriented. In certain circles, of course, it's in vogue to study the set of

games I will describe, and not everyone feels uncomfortable when a text disorients or defamiliarizes them. Some people are used to being disoriented by texts, and others enjoy the feeling of defamiliarization. Queer women like myself, for example, are frequently *dis*oriented by canonical texts or AAA games and enjoy experiencing fictional or virtual spaces where they are "correctly" oriented. However, some people -- in this case some players of games -- become uncomfortable and frustrated when faced with a space that purposefully disorients them. While I don't believe that designers necessarily make their games with those players in mind, it is in that particular disorientation and discomfort that I see the shape of a cyborg game.

This essay engages with Donna Haraway's (1991) cyborg first through her conception of blasphemy and then through Sara Ahmed's (2006) analysis of phenomenological orientation and disorientation. I use the term "cyborg game" to illustrate the particular kind of game that creates feelings of disorientation in people by twisting the tropes and forms of videogames. This creates a space where normative bodies and normative *gamers* are not immediately oriented. Although videogames in general have already been theorized as "cyborg" media, particularly through the interplay between player and avatar (Boulter, 2005; Coleman, 2013; Giddings, 2009; Nakamura, 2008), I aim to describe how some games take advantage of the entanglement of human and machine to reshape the cultural or virtual spaces of videogames. Finally, through an analysis of Anna Anthropy's *dys4ia* and *Defend the Land*, I will show that although videogames are cyborg by nature, the genre of *cyborg games* takes advantage of its nature to explicitly disorient normative players. The existence, and our awareness, of this genre is especially valuable now, when gamers who find themselves faced with these disorienting spaces feel permitted to react aggressively toward the people who design those spaces, who enjoy those spaces, and for whom those spaces are built.

Cyborg games carve out those spaces by making it hard to enjoy them. They hold out the bait of a quickly playable game and yank it back before we can catch it, thumbing their noses at us for being so naive as to expect to win. These games – and the people who make them – have a deep knowledge of the genres of (video) games and of the expectations of the people who play them. They use that knowledge to disorient players, to ask us to question the maps we use to navigate each new game we play. For many players, this disorientation and denial feels hostile: to players, to videogames, to *gamers.* But these games are faithful to videogames in the ironic sense that Haraway (1991) describes:

> Blasphemy has always seemed to require taking things very seriously. [...] Blasphemy protects one from the moral majority within, while still insisting on the need for community. Blasphemy is not apostasy. Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humour and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method [...]. At the centre of my ironic faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg.
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> (p. 150)

Both *cyborg* and *queer* are complicated terms with cultural biases that inform how we visualize and understand them. *Cyborg* calls up images of Robocop, and *queer* sounds like (is) a

homophobic slur, but a cyborg is more than a half-man-half-robot, and queerness is more than one's sexual orientation. We used to hope that the cyber-world was going to be a utopia for diversity and tolerance, imagining a network where, since no one knows you're a dog, you can be whoever you want to be. The ability to create and control our own avatars promised an unprecedented control over our self-representations and identities (Franks, 2011, par. 3). Unfortunately, despite Haraway's insistence that we are and always have been cyborgs -- humans intertwined within communications systems -- the 'cyber'spaces that those of us in North America have created only mimic the white, heteronormative patriarchal structures of our physical spaces. Regardless of their demographics, most of the virtual worlds we inhabit "still appear to be dominated by both men and masculine intentions and designs" (Plant, 1991, p.265). With the exception of some spaces and social networking sites, such as fan-fiction communities or Pinterest, which have been feminized but still imagined as white, affluent spaces, the "basic" user of a digital space is pictured as a white man. In order to be visible as something else, then, a user has to call attention to their differences, making it impossible to have the kind of free-flowing, cyborgian play with identity that Haraway sought in her manifesto. In cyber-spaces, then, you can be whoever you want to be, as long as who you want to be is a straight, white man.

That this is especially true in gaming communities is made all the more apparent thanks to #gamergate, the concerted harassment campaign masquerading as a consumer protest (Vossen, 2014; Cross, 2014). In response to people who used the visual and narrative freedom that digital games afford to imagine non-normative protagonists and spaces that seemed hostile to normative bodies, a vocal group of self-identified gamers did everything they could (from the comfort of their own homes) to silence anyone who appeared to side with SJWs, vaguely defined as anyone who wasn't content with the status quo. Despite the fact that women make up over 50% of gamers in North America (if you count "casual" games, which many gamergaters would not), and African American and Hispanic youth spend more time playing videogames than their non-Hispanic white counterparts (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2013), mainstream games are designed by and for white men almost to the exclusion of all else. There have been some recent critical or commercial exceptions, such as *Gone Home*, *The Walking Dead*, or (to some extent) *The Last of Us*, but they are exceptions, regardless of #gamergate's insistence that feminists are killing games. The largest grossing games of 2014 were *Call of Duty, Madden NFL, Destiny,* and *Grand Theft Auto V* (NDP, 2014), all games that reinscribe the structures and boundaries of the physical world; that is, they reproduce masculinist and white supremacist fantasies of race, militarization, and competition.

Disorienting Cyberspace

The larger gaming culture illustrates our apparent failure to embody Haraway's cyborg. In a medium that purportedly allows the creation and exploration of infinitely varied spaces, players are still restricted to the same experiences and ideologies that support the same structures. Despite the potentially infinite variety of spaces, our most prominent games exist in militarized space environments (*Mass Effect, Starcraft, Halo*), violent post-apocalyptic worlds (*The Last of Us, Bioshock, Doom*), or neo-medieval fantasy worlds that continue to reify whiteness and maleness (*Skyrim, Dragon Age, Diablo*). Haraway's cyborg is a complex figure, and part of that complexity is its resistance to definition. However, there are certain elements that are necessary. First, the cyborg is intertwined with communication networks and systems. Haraway, writing in

the 1980s, places the cyborg within the militaristic and oppressive system of *command-control-communication*. Although Haraway uses the new networked systems of the 20th century to map out the contours of the cyborg, we have to recognize ourselves as always having been cyborgs. The metaphor may be a 20th century invention, but the state of being integrated into our communications systems, of tracing ourselves through networks, is a human state. The purpose of the metaphor, then, is to highlight this state, to remind us that our networks are not apolitical. By calling us cyborgs, and pointing to the cyborg's ability to cross or deny previously assumed borders -- such as man/woman, human/animal, artificial/intelligence -- Haraway asks us to resist those networks of control and identity, and to create new coalitions in opposition. This cyborg should, according to Haraway, subvert, play with and rewrite assumed structures, whether narrative or political. Instead, games that do question those structures are at best labeled "serious games" or "tactical media" (Raley, 2009), and at worst put their creators in danger of harassment or threats of violence. The problem with those terms, as useful as they are taxonomically, is that, in the case of serious games, they imply an association with the limiting hierarchy that says "serious" is more valuable than "playful," as though you can't be both. Tactical media, on the other hand, though it does resist the legitimating move of the term "serious," requires an intentionality from a designer that is not necessarily true of the games in my fuzzy set.

Although we are starting to see games that explore different kinds of relationships, notably those between fathers and daughters (Brice, 2013), the primary agent is still overwhelmingly male, white, and straight. Game designer and theorist Anna Anthropy (2012a) calls for videogames "to come from a wider set of experiences and present a wider range of perspectives" (p. 5). She responds to her own call by creating games that subvert the expectations of a videogame, and require the player to take on new positions, sometimes paradoxically, as in *Defend the Land* (2011). Unrestricted by the requirements of the big-budget games industry, these small Flash games are faithful to mainstream games "as blasphemy is faithful" (Haraway, 1991, p.7): they take games seriously, while simultaneously undermining and playing with the ideals and assumptions of what a "game" is. Players will generally assume that a game is winnable, that their actions will have a meaningful effect on their ability to win, and that the central mechanic is competition. Games scholars have noted that throughout the history of games (board or video) they are more often about *play* than *agonistic competition* (Huizinga, 1955; Flanagan, 2009), but I still find myself explaining to game designers that not all games require a winner, and (more importantly, perhaps) that games that don't require a winner aren't automatically educational games, or serious games masquerading as fun, cruelly tricking you into learning to empathise with someone else.

Haraway's cyborg allows a different framework for thinking about ourselves as we relate to cybernetic systems, and although included in those systems and cyborgs is an acknowledgement of space, I turn to Sara Ahmed's (2006) construction of dis/orientation and queerness for a clearer analysis of how we orient ourselves in spaces. People whose bodies fit within dominant norms expect to be orientated towards the objects in their reach. Ahmed explains that when a tool fails to do what we expect it to do, such as in her example of a heavy hammer that we cannot pick up, we assume that the failure lies in the object, when in fact the failure lies in our bodies. The hammer is "too heavy" for us, but not "too heavy" for another. Failure, then, lies in the body's attempt to extend toward an object and the refusal, the denial, of that extension (p. 48). Games are intertwined with ideas of space and place, being, often, virtual spaces that we inhabit

through the avatar of the player-character. But game spaces do not replace real-world spaces; they are *additional* spaces, mirror spaces. Avatars may not inhabit our physical spaces, but they, and the virtual spaces they extend us into, are still "proximate enough ... to make or leave an impression" (p. 14). This doubling of space creates the possibility of dis- or re-orientation, depending on the subject. When a subject who has always understood the world to center around themselves is placed in a space that refuses that centrality, they must find their way again. They must re-orient themselves. Rather than reaching out to find familiar objects in expected places, they reach out to find that there is nothing where they expected something (or something where they expected nothing): "disorientation occurs when that extension fails" (Ahmed, 2006, p.11). Game-spaces seem to me to be perfect spaces for experimentation with dis/re-orientation -- the alienation and discomfort that we feel when we are lost or disoriented (physically, psychically, metaphorically) can be replicated, reconstructed, reimagined in virtual spaces. In the moment of blasphemy, the game's existence as an "object-in-itself" -- that is, an object separate from the body, made by someone else who is orientated differently toward that object (p.48) -- becomes impossible to ignore. This disorients players, who can then choose how to respond; do players sit comfortably in the moment of disorientation, in that moment of irony? Or, more likely in this age of #gamergate, do players aggressively or defensively attempt to reorient themselves, by sending harassing comments to queer game developers in order to reassert the structures of the world outside the game?

This aggressive or defensive urge to be reoriented means that cyborg games *cannot* be AAA, mainstream games. The more people who play a cyborg game, the less blasphemous it can be before someone gets doxxed, harassed, or accused of destroying games, but sometimes they manage to slip past the gatekeepers of gaming culture. Of the cyborg games I'm talking about the biggest (in terms of the larger gaming culture's awareness of its existence) is *Gone Home* (2013), which won a number of game of the year awards when it came out, to screams of horror from hardcore gamers. *Gone Home* is disorienting, queer, and blasphemous. The game tells you, over and over again, that you are in a horror story. It was prototyped in the *Amnesia* engine and its mechanics, narrative tropes, and sound design remind the player, over and over again, that what they're about to experience is terrifying, horrific. Ironically, of course, for many players it *was* actually horrific: in the end, there's no bloody scene or massacre to uncover, no haunted house to flee, just the coming of age story of a queer girl and the aching nostalgia of coming home to find everything going on without you. The half-joke trailer called "Gun Home," which promises to add guns to *Gone Home* and turn it into "a *real* game" (Dorkly, 2014), prods at and calls attention to the outcry that *Gone Home* couldn't be Game of the Year because it wasn't "a real game" (the implication being that real games involve shooting, apparently). For people expecting a horror game, expecting to reach out and find bloody bodies and psychopaths, not hair dye and mixtapes, *Gone Home* is a lesson in disorientation. In the end, *Gone Home* is the story of women, girls, sisters, from which men are literally absent -- and tampons and hair dye are in abundance: you can find boxes of tampons in the bathroom! *Tampons*! The biggest blasphemy that *Gone Home* speaks, though, is that you don't actually need to play the whole game. You don't need to visit each room, and you don't need to decode each puzzle. You don't even have to know what you're doing. In fact, the more you know about horror games, the harder it will be for you to really play the game, because while Sam talks about coming to terms with being in love with her best friend Lonnie, you'll be peering into corners and trying to figure out if the great-uncle is going to come back from the dead to murder you. I avoided going into what I

knew was the last room because I knew the tropes of horror games, and I knew the tropes of queer coming of age stories, but I mustered up my courage and walked up those stairs. I turned the corner, half-peeking through my fingers, breath held and chest tight, and found Sam's journal and her sweet goodbye letter. Not a suicide note, but a love letter to the life she was going to be able to live with Lonnie. There is no grand conspiracy of ghosts and murderers in *Gone Home*, just the heartbreakingly sweet story of two girls in love. *Gone Home* is disorienting in those instances, and you might suspect that the game designers are laughing at you, but the game itself doesn't push you away. You click on an object and pick it up. You move it and it stays where you put it. You may not be able to change the ending to Sam's story, no matter how many clues you uncover, but you *can* uncover every single one. The game itself still wants you to play it, it's just not the game you thought you were playing when you started. *Gone Home* is a *cyborg game* because it is blasphemous to the tropes of the horror/survival game; it takes players who believe they know what to expect and gives them an entirely different story. We can see, through *Gone Home,* the possibilities of videogames: they are spaces in which we can tell different stories, queer stories. However disorienting *Gone Home* may be to people who are familiar with horror games, it is still fairly simple for players to reorient themselves once they understand what *Gone Home* is actually about. As soon as players realize that the game is a queer coming-of-age story - - a realization that might happen sooner or later, depending on the player's familiarity with *that* trope -- instead of a horror story, the game space is legible and the player can find their way.

Unfortunately, many game-spaces center their worlds around the same subject: the white soldier killing brown terrorists in *Call of Duty* games (Nakamura, 2013), the man hiring and then murdering prostitutes in *Grand Theft Auto* (Everett and Watkins, 2008), the older man learning how to become a better person through the suffering of daughter-figures in *Bioshock Infinite* and *Last of Us* (Brice, 2014). Everett and Watkins (2008) refer to these spaces as racialized pedagogical zones, since they serve to reinforce stereotypical and racist representations of marginalized people, rather than question or disrupt them. Because of these racialized pedagogical zones, there is no purposeful reorientation to be found; people who are disoriented in physical spaces continue to be disoriented in game spaces. People who find their way through physical spaces apparently naturally, as though the world is constructed for them, with *their* bodies in mind, navigate game-spaces with the same ease. The habits of reaching out for objects, ready at hand, with obvious purpose and use are unquestioned and repeated in games that drop tools just before you need them, whose digital maps lead you to the goal while making you think you're finding your own way. A game that replicates the privileges of certain bodies is faithful to oppressive structures, faithful to a games industry that still struggles to remember that other people exist, and faithful to a (however small and unrepresentative) community of so-called gamers who believe that women and people of color should be barely seen and definitely not heard. There is no blasphemy in creating a space that has no room for different bodies.

Heresy

Blasphemy is dangerous, however. To blaspheme is to put yourself at risk of censure, of being called a heretic, and of being burned at the stake, hopefully metaphorically, by the adherents of the faith who fail to recognize your ironic faithfulness. Cyborg game designers don't make games because they hate them. They make games because they love games, and they just want to see games that love them back. Unfortunately, however, the act of creating a game that loves its

designer is seen by mainstream gamers as an act of hostility. Despite being an act of love, a game that loves transgender people, as Anthropy's does, appears to a cis-sexist culture to hate cisgender people.

The relationship between game designer and player is frequently described as at least somewhat cooperative: the player of the game creates the story within the world that the designer provides. Since the player chooses where to go and what actions to take, the player of a game, to some extent, co-writes the story (Lanham, 1995). For this relationship to be truly cooperative, the player of a game must engage critically with the space and mechanics of the game, learning how the particular game works, and how their actions can affect the narrative. The player becomes more than a spectator; they become an active participant in the narrative (Raley, 2010, p. 300). This participation is *necessarily* cooperative. Though it is possible to willfully mis-play a game – just as it is possible to willfully mis-read any text – perhaps by refusing to learn the proper controls, or by refusing to attempt to reach the goals set out by the game's mechanics, the narrative of most games will be inaccessible if the player does not, at some point, agree to learn and play within the game's mechanics, which can include enacting physical violence or murdering people. The designer is also required to create a world within certain parameters; though there are games that are designed to be "unwinnable" or, at least, legendarily difficult (such as "Kaizo Mario" or "Desert Bus"), there is an unspoken understanding that designers will follow the rules that the game expresses. That is, if a game claims to allow the player to make a choice, the player expects that choice to affect future game-play, and the outcome will be different compared to the other options. When games do not conform to these expectations, players are frustrated and disappointed.

When Bioware released the third instalment of their popular *Mass Effect* (ME) series, players found themselves mostly playing the same ending, despite the seemingly infinite different paths they took to get there. The mechanics and narrative of the *Mass Effect* series promised players that their actions in the game would change their future game-play, so when the ending appeared to ignore the vast majority of those choices, players felt betrayed. In an open letter to *Mass Effect 3* players that responds to the criticism Bioware received for the ending of their game, Bioware's co-founder explained that they understood that the emotional response is due to the fact that players experience "so much player control and ownership of the story" (Muzyka, 2012). Muzyka's statement implies, somewhat paradoxically, that if the players didn't have so much control, they wouldn't be so upset about the apparent lack of it. According to many unsatisfied players, though, the balance of designer control and player control was not as the game and its promotional material promised, so Bioware eventually released extra free material so that players could access an ending that provided more context and plot. That extra material, however, did not *change* the contested ending, since *Bioware* developers wanted to "maintain […] the artistic integrity of the game" (Muzyka, 2012).

This artistic integrity -- the story that Bioware tells and the themes the *Mass Effect* series explores (one of which is, coincidentally, the exploration of agency and compromise) -- seems to be at odds with the ideal of player and designer as co-writers of a story. In order to present a particular message or artistic vision, designers must retain some control, separate from the story that players co-write. A game where a designer retains control over certain aspects of the story and allows players to co-write other, less integral, parts of the narrative is no longer the ideal

cooperative creation. When I first finished *ME3*, before hearing about players' frustrations with the ending, I was surprised – disoriented; I was presented with the most important choice in the universe, making me the most important *person* in the universe, but all of the parameters of my choice were determined by someone else, long before I was faced with it. Nothing I had done or could do would change the options before me. To me, it felt like the game was telling me that free will, true agency, was and had always been illusory. Every big choice I made throughout the series was, in fact, a small drop and my (Shepard's) importance was simply in my presence. My decisions meant nothing: all that the game required was that I *be* there. This felt, at the time, like an incredibly cyborg-ian ending to a massive franchise, like a smart reversal of the culture of the player-character as author of his own destiny. Some fans felt betrayed, like Bioware was mocking the hundreds of hours they spent in the *ME* universe, and maybe they were; that's what I liked about the ending. It felt like they pulled the rug out from under us, laughing when we shrieked and became confused, because we thought that *we* were holding the rug. Unfortunately, this blasphemy appears to have been accidental (or at least not profitable), because judging from Bioware's attempts to appease its players with free downloadable content and extra game-play, the purpose of the original ending was *not* to make its players aware of the imbalance in control. Or, if it was, the angry response from players, framed as consumer protests -- eerily similar, in fact, to the "consumer protest" of #gamergate -- was enough to get Bioware to back down. I'm not particularly interested in the reasons *why* they acceded to fans' complaints (financial, political, commercial, whatever), but it seems clear that Bioware's size -- of their company, of their hold on gaming culture, of their franchise -- limited their ability to throw up the middle finger at their fans (however lovingly), because somewhere someone did the math and you can't expect people to buy your next $70 game if they think you hate them. What Bioware does is the best that we can expect from multi-million-dollar franchises. They can inch toward blasphemy, but cannot actually achieve it, because the pressures of profitability and marketability will inevitably conflict with the desire to disorient the player.

Blasphemy

Games like *dys4ia* and *Defend the Land* on the other hand, don't need to cater to their imagined players, because they aren't made *for* players in the same way that Bioware's games are. To some extent, obviously, you are supposed to play them, but it almost seems as though the games resent being played. Rather than engage in dialogue with the player, Anthropy refuses the players the opportunity to speak through the avatar, restricting them to the actions most useful for Anthropy's goals, and those goals are pretty clearly to "undermine both the world-view and the material reality of two thousand years of patriarchal [and cis-sexist] control" (Plant, 1991, p. 265).

dys4ia, released in early 2012 by Anna Anthropy, is an autobiographical game describing her experience with Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT). *dys4ia* was published on *Newgrounds*, which is a popular content-sharing community, under the "simulation game" category. Mimicking 8-bit style, *dys4ia* presents Anthropy's experience with HRT from deciding and requesting to go on it, through all the obstacles and complications involved in its use, and towards a hopeful conclusion. Anthropy makes it clear that the game is "not meant to be representative of every trans person," as it is a deeply personal exploration of her own experience (Anthropy, 2012b). The game is divided into four episodes ("Gender Bullshit", "Medical

Bullshit", "Hormonal Bullshit", and "It Gets Better?"), each of which is comprised of several mini-games that illustrate an aspect of Anthropy's experience. In order to move from one episode to the next, the player must complete each mini-game in a specific manner, often enacting the action (or lack thereof) that Anthropy undertook.

While most comments on the *dys4ia* page on Newgrounds react positively, congratulating Anthropy for creating a compelling story that allowed them to empathize with or better understand the experiences of a transgender person, some commenters complain or suggest that *dys4ia* should have been uploaded in the Art Portal, or at least as an art game instead of a simulation, mirroring the common assumption that there is a distinction between art games and just games. Positive commenters claim that although they "really liked this 'game'," they "wouldn't really call it [a game]" (Swarles, 2012), since the "gameplay mechanics are almost entirely sacrificed for the sake of the message" (hakberhut, 2012). However, other commenters are less than pleased with their experience of *dys4ia*. Accepting that *dys4ia* is a game, they claim that "the game is still very bad" (tranman1, 2012), and that it "is the most awful and pretentious piece of shit" that should not be given praise either for its content or its design (darkroom0716, 2012). That there is "no difficulty, no challenge, there is no fun nor entertaining aspect to the game" or any "ironic or satirical nature" is particularly insulting to this commenter (darkroom0716, 2012). Although, like me, there are people who appreciate the artistic and social value of the game, others resent its claim to the term "game." That resentment highlights what makes *dys4ia* a cyborg game: players are disoriented, are unable to position their experience solidly in the category (within the boundaries) of "game."

Anthropy has her own definition of a game, in opposition to what she sees as the time-wasting elements of skills-based games. For Anthropy, it is "engaging with a set of rules that makes a game, not having one's time wasted" (Kuchera, 2012), and *dys4ia* is full of rules and limitations, of requests for consent and denials of agency. No one is forced to play *dys4ia*, but once the player "press[es] down to begin" (Anthropy, 2012b), Anthropy expects the player to be ready to "get inside all the excessive connections and unruly categories in order to make sense at all" (Haraway, 2004, p.4). By requiring this consent and physical engagement from the player, Anthropy gives the reader the only choice they have, to "press down" and read more of the story, or to exit. Continue or exit, it is the only choice the player has, but the player makes that choice again and again. Each mini-game directs the player with the same icon (the arrow) that accompanies her first instruction. Like a constant check-in, the arrow reminds the player that she has chosen to participate.

Anthropy's understanding of a game is disorienting to players who believe that agency and interactivity makes a game, rather than its rules and limitations. *dys4ia* does not build itself around the player, as other, more responsive, games do. Responding to criticism that her game does not challenge its players by testing their skills, Anthropy explains that, no matter how many different ways you have of completing a task, it doesn't "serve the story [her] game is telling" to be forced to repeat those actions until you achieve perfection (Kuchera, 2012). In *dys4ia*, the player is forced to react to the game and its mechanics, rather than enjoy the game reacting to *her* actions. For example, in "Gender Bullshit", the player is faced with a lumpy torso attempting to squeeze into a t-shirt. The icon instructs the player to press the down arrow, causing the figure to move and jiggle, never succeeding in putting the shirt on. If the player follows the instructions

for a few seconds, the screen displays the next mini-game. Another version of *dys4ia* might allow the player to press "up" and throw the shirt away, press a (secret) combination of keys to make the shirt fit , or use a previously-learned combination of keys to go to the store and buy another one that *does* fit. This would provide the 'interactivity' that *dys4ia*'s critics seem to long for, but would make the game entirely different. To give the reader a multitude of solutions to the 'puzzle' of the ill-fitting t-shirt would not reflect Anthropy's experience with the work, tedium, and obstacles in her life. You can't just throw away your clothing and choose not to wear a shirt, without significant consequences elsewhere. Not everyone has the skills, supplies, or equipment needed to tailor their clothing. And not everyone can afford the time or money to go to a clothing store, where they might risk being misgendered, mocked, and forced to leave without finding a shirt that fits both their body and their desires *anyways*. Players who pressed enter on a simulation game expected to be able to pretend that *they* were the ones going through HRT, but Anthropy refuses them that centrality. *dys4ia*, as Anthropy reminds us in the introduction to the game, is *her* story.

This disorientation is incredibly frustrating for players who are used to games that encourage a one-to-one relationship with the avatar; you "are" the avatar, or, at the very least, you are the person who controls the avatar, the *player*-character. In *dys4ia*, however, Anthropy controls you, while you attempt (and fail) to control the ever-shifting avatar. The avatar is at times a shield, a mouth, a lumpy body, the female figure from washroom signage, etc., if it is even on screen at all. Anthropy allows you to continue the game only by completing the actions she has determined as successful – you must struggle to wear the shirt, shave every errant hair, choose to damage your liver and suffer from high blood pressure. The player of the game is only barely necessary for the story to continue – perhaps the indignation some critics of the game display stems from this affront to their importance. The only person who really matters to the story is Anna Anthropy, and the player of the game is only there to help her tell it.

Traditionally, games "pursu[e] the masculine dream of self-control, self-identification, self-knowledge and self-determination" by emphasizing player agency and control over the choices the designer would make, so a game that limits player control to the press of a button stakes new, potentially uncomfortable, ground (Plant, 1991, p.267). Anthropy uses the inexpensive and unimpressive graphics of the retro flash game to write her own kind of game, and claim a space that *looks* like videogames, but is her personal expression of them. By reducing (and, at times, removing) the player's ability to control what happens in a space that looks like one where she is used to feeling powerful, Anthropy transgresses the unwritten rules of (especially simulation) games, and moves the borders between player and designer, taking up more space as a designer and leaving players only with a click. Haraway calls for us to find "pleasure in the confusion of boundaries" (Haraway, 2991, p.8), and although not all players have found that pleasure in Anthropy's game, that is what *dys4ia* gives us the space to do.

Where *dys4ia* is autobiographical and subverts expectations of the procedurality of a game, *Defend the Land* (2011) follows the conventions of a game more closely, and appears to be a test of skill. The game informs the player of her success or failure before instructing her to repeat (in the event of failure) or continue (if she succeeds). Released on Anthropy's website in 2011, *Defend the Land* (also called *Transgressions!*) requires the player to identify the trespassing transgender woman in a group of "womyn" attending the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival

(MWMF). *Defend The Land* is a clear parody of the policy of the MWMF to make the festival a place where "womyn who were born as, and have lived their lives as, womyn" can spend time with the same (Vogel). In *Defend the Land*, the player is notified that "[s]o-called 'transgendered women' have risked their lives, their health, the rejection of their loved ones, and physical violence [in order] TO SMUGGLE THEIR TREACHEROUS PENISES INTO THE MICHYGAN WOMYN'S MUSYC FESTYVAL" (Anthropy, 2011). The goal of the game is simple: faced with a screen full of seemingly identical dancing women, the player must "click the impostor who has a penis" (Anthropy, 2011). Since the dancing figures are all identical and low-resolution, the player is forced to inspect each constantly moving character, seeking a penis that flashes on screen so quickly that it is difficult to tell if it actually appears. Once the player clicks on the suspected transgender woman, the screen flashes "Transgression!" and notifies the player of her success or failure. A failed attempt admonishes the player for disgracing one of her "womyn-born womyn sisters" and leaving "the impostor free to touch her treacherous penis to the land" (Anthropy, 2011). The player is then instructed to "Click to try again". If the player is successful in catching the 'imposter', she is congratulated for "keeping the land safe for womyn-born womyn" and that even though "the master's tools may never dismantle the master's house," they will, at least, "keep those bitches out of OUR house" (Anthropy, 2011). Since "there are always impostors trying to sneak in," the player is encouraged to "click to try and catch another one" (Anthropy, 2011). Regardless of the outcome, then, the player is always invited to "click" and return to the same screen to repeat the same action again and again. Winning the game gives the player no reward or extra content, beyond the backhanded praise in the "Good Work!" screen.

The format of *Defend the Land* seems at odds with Anthropy's defense of the lack of challenge in *dys4ia*, where she claims that games that rely on skill-based events "force the player to repeat scenes because they're afraid of being seen as skill-less, even when the repetition doesn't serve the story the game is telling" (Kuchera, 2012). The test of the player's ability to spot the penis in *Defend the Land* seems meaningless, given the slight difference between the failure and success outcomes, as well as the fact that both outcomes invite the player to begin again. Why, then, create the test of skill if there is no measurable impact? A game that uses the skill test, according to player expectations, would provide incentives to succeed, such as access to a more difficult level, extra tools to make the next attempt easier, or, if the player fails, punishments that make the next attempt more difficult. In the case of *Defend the Land*, the purpose lies in Anthropy's disclaimer: repetitive skills testing is worth using if it "serve[s] the story the game is telling" (Kuchera, 2012). The repetition of the same test, which does not end until the player quits the game, embodies the futility of anti-transgender policies as well as the pervasive oppression transgender women face in spaces that are, supposedly, safe for women. *Defend the Land,* which places the player in a never-ending loop, embeds MWMF's anti-transgender-women policy as futile and meaningless. In this sense, then, *Defend the Land* is a mocking response both to the policy and the trope of the repetitive skills test that Anthropy parodies.

Anthropy's ironic use of the skills test is not the only ironic reversal in this game. While most games allow the player to control a hero (or at least an anti-hero), the player of *Defend the Land* is asked to play the character of the stereotyped feminist – bra-less, with a sour expression on her face. This is a figure that most players would find distasteful, for any number of reasons. As a feminist, this stereotype is one I've had lobbed at myself, and being required to identify with it

was a strange, discomfiting moment. The explanation of the game's premise plays on similar stereotypes, peppering 'y's instead of 'e's and 'i's at random; it presents the "womyn born womyn" orientation as ridiculous, but also instructs you to "take it very seriously" (Haraway, 2004, p.4) within the framework of the game. Without that irony, *Defend the Land* would not be a cyborg game; it would be one more expression of the oppression transgender people face in a cis-sexist culture. Given the exaggerated clichés, as well as Anthropy's experience as a transgender woman, *Defend the Land* is a critique of a "natural matrix of unity" that names the origin of 'woman' in her sex (Haraway, 1991, p.16). By forcing the player to recognize the futility of "womyn born womyn" while simultaneously and repetitively enacting it, *Defend the Land* asks the player to embody an uncomfortable paradox, which only becomes more uncomfortable as they game continues.

The avatar that represents the MWMF organizers and the player's orientation within the game does not move in response to the player's actions, and the only signifier of the player's actions on screen is a cursor. As with *dys4ia*, Anthropy creates a distance between the player and the avatar. Unlike *dys4ia*, though, Anthropy does not step in to control the avatar; she does not represent the avatar as herself, nor does she absolve the player of the actions the player has to take in completing the game. This is not to say that Anthropy has not carefully controlled the agency of the player – there is still only one action the player can undertake (click or quit) – rather Anthropy does not let the player hide behind the avatar. It is not the angry feminist who points out the transgressor (successfully or not); it is the player who "clicks" on the offending woman. Just as the player of *dys4ia* saw Anthropy through her struggle towards acceptance by clicking, the player of *Defend the Land* wields the same power to violent end. The avatar displayed at the bottom of the screen, rather than being a representation of the player, is instead a mirror to the character that the player embodies with each click of the mouse. Each click of the button asks the player to consider how they, personally, are implicit in violence against transgender women.
Anthropy's games embody irony, play, and a "blasphemous" knowledge of the videogame industry. If her games make the player uncomfortable, they do so in the service of illustrating her experience, and critiquing oppressive structures. When Anthropy takes control over the avatar in *dys4ia*, she does so to point out the ways in which her own life is restrictive or limiting. When the player is forced to commit an act of violence against a transgender woman in *Defend the Land*, she does so with the understanding that her character (the person committing the act of violence) is worthy of ridicule and censure. *dys4ia* is a cyborg game when it presents the player with a series of mini-games that do not actually require skill to complete, when the player cannot meaningfully position herself in relation to the avatar, and in relation to Anthropy. *Defend the Land* is a cyborg game when it laughs at the player, and asks the player to laugh at oppressive structures. It looks like a game, but refuses to settle into a solution, to settle into a 'win'.

Conclusion

Cyborg games create new spaces, parallel to but separate from the sexist, racist, ableist, and generally bigoted communities of mainstream videogames. Aware of, and working from, the rules, expectations, and tropes of the videogame, it is faithfully unfaithful to its mainstream father. A player of a cyborg game is disoriented, unable to take control of the game in the way she expects; as she reaches out to orient herself, the designer limits her movement and points her in one of two directions: move forward or quit. The cyborg game is a powerful tool, requiring the

player to embody whatever actions the designer embeds, and when games like *Gone Home* or *dys4ia* receive pained, offended criticism, we see the potential success of videogames as a cyberfeminist medium. These games are making people who've felt comfortable with their worlds (virtual, physical, hybrid) feel deeply *un*comfortable. They're making people aware that the choice to ignore entire swathes of genders, races, sexualities is just that -- a choice. Ahmed (2006) makes it clear in the conclusion to *Queer Phenomenology* that disorientation is a valuable state. For some people, the moment of disorientation is exciting. For others, it's horrifying. Either way, it is a moment in which a person is forced to acknowledge the space around them, its construction, and their own orientation within that space, and by extension others. Regardless of our reaction, then, those "moments of disorientation are vital" (p. 157).

However, a tool is only useful when it's actually used, and unfortunately many gamers are unable, or unwilling to play the products of cyborg game design, particularly since their central games -- high-budget AAA games -- are antithetical to cyborg games' most important values. I want very much to be hopeful, to be able to say that games companies like *Bioware* are trying (and facing criticism for not catering solely to "straight male gamers" (Gaider, 2011)). I want to celebrate the fact that we have games that offer a kind of alternate universe to people who live their lives in a space that pushes them out, that forces them to fit into spaces that do not conform to their bodies. Cyborg games offer a space that is reversed -- now *we* fit in and *you* have to feel what it's like to be constantly refused by the world you are navigating. They are at once a space built for marginalized bodies and a harsh critique of gaming's canonical spaces, incredibly empowering and vulnerable. Cyborg games are both disorienting and orienting, depending on the body of the person inhabiting the avatar -- they are, of course, both at once, paradoxically. The existence of cyborg games shows the potential of games to create infinitely vast worlds and spaces, but it's hard to remain hopeful when #gamergate continues to rear up any time someone speaks about it. When people (particularly women) are given the same choice as Anthropy's players -- continue or quit -- in a world where the consequence of continuing is potential harm (physical and psychological), the choice is, for many women in/near/around the games industry, an easy one to make. Unfortunately, the disorienting spaces of cyborg games are brief fantasies, because, in the end, we have to stop playing them and return to the world that disorients and refuses us, that tells us very clearly *this is not for you*.

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[1] I take this term from Farah Mendlesohn's (2008) discussion of the problems of trying to define the genre of fantasy literature. The "fuzzy set" – a range of critical definitions (p. xiii) – allows a scholar to choose certain definitions of their genre in particular circumstances and contexts. In this case, it allows an acknowledgement of the differing definitions of "game" and avoids reinscribing the restrictive limits of choosing a specific definition.