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**HUMANITIES RESEARCH PAPER 2019**

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Topic: An Analysis of Porpentine's *With Those We Love Alive*

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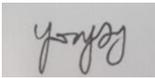
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**Declaration**

I declare that this assignment is my own work and does not involve plagiarism or collusion. The sources of other people's work have been appropriately referenced, failing which I am willing to accept the necessary disciplinary action(s) to be taken against me.

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Date of Submission: 6 August 2019



## **Chapter 1: Introductory Chapter**

### **1.1 Background**

There is something unsettling about Porpentine's *With Those We Love Alive*. Written using the Twine software, the hypertext game "tells the story of someone who lives at the beck and call of an alien Empress, creating new objects in the Empress's service" (Short, 2014). As part of the game, the player is also asked to draw on their bodies corresponding to specific moments and ideas as the game progresses.

As Landow (1997), one of the earliest theorists of hypertext, defines, hypertext "denotes text composed of blocks of text... and the electronic links that join them". Importantly, he also notes that hypertext "extend[s] the notion of text... by including visual information, sound, animation and other forms of data" (Landow, 1997, p. 3). Hypertext fiction, then, is fiction written using hypertext, where readers must click on hyperlinks, or simply, links, to access different connected passages. While different works of hypertext fiction vary in terms of how passages are structured, the reader's choice of links would often affect which passages they are able to access and read, as well as when they are able to do so. That is, the reader's choice of links affects the course of the story that they are reading, in the process foreclosing or delaying the reading of other possible passages. This function of hypertext fiction, among others, has given rise to much academic discussion over the differences hypertext fiction might have in comparison to traditional print media.

While it has been pointed out that hypertext fiction is "a broad textual media category... not in itself a literary genre of any kind", academic debate on hypertext fiction has nonetheless focused considerably on its effect on the reader and the reading experience in general (Aarseth, 1997, p. 5). These debates have included discussions on reader agency and the way readers' understanding of the text is shaped by the "multilinear" nature of hypertext, as Aarseth terms it, referring to the potentially different sets and sequences of passages readers might end up following. Some of these key areas of debate which are particularly relevant to this paper will be further discussed in the literature review.

### **1.2 Rationale**

As with Porpentine's past work, *With Those We Love Alive* (WTWLA) features queer themes, through its transgender protagonist and its focus more generally on experiences of trauma and oppression (O'Connor, 2014).

Porpentine's work has often been analysed in relation to other works of the "Twine Revolution" - a growing movement of independent queer game designers writing using the financially and technically accessible Twine software (Harvey, 2014). In fact, critical examination of games in relation to queerness, has increased in recent years as part of the growing field of queer game studies, and this has naturally included works of hypertext fiction, especially those made in Twine.



Using these discussions as a starting point, this paper hence sees *WTWLA*'s rich queer themes and "innovative" hypertext structure as a suitable starting point for further analysis of how exactly features of hypertext can be used in hopefully and empoweringly portraying queerness (Huang, 2017).

### **1.3 Research Questions**

1. How does *With Those We Love Alive* use hypertext game mechanics to portray queerness as "no fun"?
2. How does *With Those We Love Alive*, in encouraging readers to fail, transcend cycles of oppression?

### **1.4 Thesis Statement**

Through its use of hypertext game mechanics, *With Those We Love Alive*, while initially portraying the protagonist as helpless and lacking agency, eventually presents the protagonist's failure to conform as a means of transcending cycles of oppression.

### **1.5 Scope of Research / Delimitation(s)**

Some of the aspects of *WTWLA*'s game design unfortunately cannot be covered in this paper.

Although many have picked up on the game mechanic of drawing on one's own body as particularly meaningful (Bragança et al., 2016; Gerdes, 2016), this mechanic will not be discussed in the paper in order to concentrate on features more universally found in hypertext fiction, such as the use of links. For the same reason, the game's rich sound and visual design, which play a large role in informing the reading experience, will not be discussed in much detail. Hopefully, this will allow for a more focused analysis of the game's writing itself.

### **1.6 Significance of Research / Usefulness**

Despite the recent increase of research into the queer potential of Twine games, analyses often do not consider the role the use of hypertext in particular plays.

As part of the field of queer game studies, current analyses of works of hypertext fiction made in Twine often do not draw on the same vocabulary employed by earlier theorists of hypertext, instead discussing game mechanics more generally. On the other hand, while earlier theorists of hypertext drew parallels between the nature of hypertext and experiences



of the body (Aarseth, 1997; Landow, 1997), analyses of the specific uses of links and other key features of hypertext in portraying queerness were not as common.

Hence, in drawing from both theories of hypertext and queer theory, this paper hopes to make even more explicit the potential linkages between the two.

## **1.7 Limitations**

Any research into hypertext fiction will inevitably need to take into consideration the broadness of the category, including differences in the software used to create works of hypertext fiction and the different ways writers apply the features of hypertext for creative effect (Aarseth, 1997). For example, some software, such as Twine, explicitly show the reader where links are in a passage, whereas others, such as Storyspace, give the writer the option not to do so. Other examples would be the writer's choice to add sound, the writer's visual design of the passages presented and the types of links used (clicking on links may lead to other passages, to external web pages of the text, to changes within the current passage etc...).

Hence, it is important to acknowledge that *WTWLA* is just one work of hypertext fiction and cannot be taken to be representative of hypertext fiction as a whole. Due to the abovementioned variations, it would therefore be impossible to make general conclusions as to the nature of hypertext and hypertext fiction (Aarseth, 1997). Rather, through analysing *WTWLA*, this paper hopes to explore just some of the many meaningful possibilities of the uses of hypertext fiction, and recognises that some of its findings may not be easily applied to other works of its kind.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

As has been brought up in the introduction of this paper, there are a multitude of areas within the study of hypertext fiction which have formed the basis of academic debate. However, only one will be discussed in the literature review in this paper: the effect of the use of hypertext on the agency of the reader.

### **2.1 Hypertext Fiction and Reader Agency**

While it is generally agreed upon that hypertext fiction involves the reader in the reader's clicking of links, there is some disagreement regarding the nature of such involvement. More specifically, there are two main views on the effect hypertext has on reader agency.

The first view, advocated by Landow (1997), claims that hypertext turns the reader into what he terms a "reader-author" by allowing them to be "active, even intrusive" in "choos[ing] his or her centre of investigation and experience" along with "his or her way through the metatext". In this view, the reader of hypertext fiction has control over which passages, and



in what order, that they read, hence providing them freedom to “construct” the text as they wish.

Responding to Landow and others’ claims, however, Aarseth (1997) argues that books in fact also do allow the reader to read according to sequences of their choosing, since readers can skip between passages of text, but what makes hypertext fiction unique is its provision of predetermined reading paths that readers must follow. Moreover, unlike in books, where skipping between passages could potentially create confusion, the “multilinear” nature of most hypertext fiction allows for the author to create different reading experiences, involving different passages of text, that are all still able to make sense.

While Aarseth (1997) disagrees that hypertext necessarily turns readers into “reader-authors”, he does seem to embrace the effect it has on the reading experience nonetheless, describing works of hypertext fiction as “game-world[s] or world-game[s]” where “it is possible to explore, get lost, and discover secret paths”. How is one to reconcile the seemingly contradictory beliefs that hypertext fiction confines the reader to author-determined paths and links, yet allows the reader freedom in participating in the hypertext as a game? While Aarseth recognises readers cannot change the outcomes of the stories in themselves, he seems to celebrate the different experiences readers may have based on their choices while playing through the text. While this may not be the completely autonomous “reader-author” suggested by Landow, it is nonetheless difficult to deny that the reader of hypertext fiction does have a role to play in shaping their own reading experience.

Hence, it would seem that hypertext is freeing in that it allows readers some agency in choosing which reading paths to follow, but only to the extent that such paths and the links that form them are decided by the author. Either way, the underlying assumption remains that the choice of links is important and will have an impact on the course of the story.

## **2.2 Hypertext Fiction and Queer Theory**

Several attempts have been made to draw connections between hypertext and queer theory. Alexander (1997) claims that “both hypertext and queer theory are about breaking out of simple, often binary, hierarchical and linear forms of thought”. Here, he suggests that the nature of how hypertext systems, such as the World Wide Web, are created through the linking of “randomized and multi-dimensional texts” parallels how “sexualities are complex stories told by many different voices in many different ways” (Alexander, 1997).

More broadly, however, game studies has commonly been linked to queer theory through the idea of failure. Halberstam (2011), in his theory of “queer failure”, argues that “in losing, [failure] imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being... as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power”. That is, failure can be seen as a way of rejecting and replacing the hegemonic notions of success and normality which lead to the marginalisation of queer people and other oppressed groups. In the face of oppressive systems, Halberstam seems to suggest, we should resist by simply not playing along.



The idea of queer failure has since been eagerly taken up by game studies scholars. Ruberg (2015), for example, draws on Halberstam's ideas in rejecting the supposed need for games to be fun at all, suggesting that having "no fun" in games, which is oftentimes caused by the player's failure, can be used as a powerful representation of the painful realities of living under oppression. One example she provides is that of frustratingly or boringly repetitive games, where the player seems to be unable to do anything new or meaningful, hence reflecting the daily lives of queer people as being on "the highest difficulty setting". Through this, Ruberg argues that failure in video games not only challenges oppression, but also exposes the effects of it.

Additionally, scholars have argued that failure, as an oftentimes fundamental game mechanic, can be used to challenge traditional gaming culture's heteronormative and excessively masculine portrayal of success (Youngblood, 2017). One such challenge would be to shift the focus away from testing and rewarding players for their overtly "masculine" technical competency, instead focusing on other more experiential elements of gameplay, something which Twine games have been praised for. As Harvey (2014) suggests, Twine games "encapsulate the queer art of failure, in rejecting challenge and thus validation of hegemonic masculinity". That is, Twine games' "queer failure" arise not from their failure-based game mechanics, but in their "failure" at being like traditional games.

How, then, does the idea of failure come across in *WTWLA*? How can failure be defined in the game? Given Ruberg's (2015) emphasis on the frustrating experience of being denied agency as a player, this paper takes failure in the game as being manifested in the reader's lack of agency, which is especially suitable given its contradiction of hypertext fiction's early ideal of providing the reader agency. Failure can also arguably be seen as negative outcomes for the reader's choices, where the reader is made to feel bad for making a particular choice over another. Lastly, of course, failure can also be understood on a literal level as it is described in the story itself.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Drawing on schema theory, Bell (2014) provides a useful, systematic way of analysing individual links in hypertext fiction. As she describes, "the anticipatory and retrospective nature of hypertext reading... show[s] how individual links work with or against readers' existing schemata so as to either confirm or revise their predictions about what they will find when following a link" (p. 146). That is, given that hypertextual links suggest a connection between individual passages, and that this connection must be inferred by the reader, "the contrast between what a reader expects when she or he follows a link and what she or he does find is particularly pertinent" (p. 146).

Bell (2014) provides three key schemata that would inform readers' understanding and expectations of a hypertext passage, explaining that "linguistic schemata" comes in at the level of individual links, as links, often indicated through the marking of specific words, would then suggest certain kinds of information in the corresponding passage, thus producing the



effect of either refreshing or reinforcing readers' expectations. This happens alongside more general expectations based on readers' "text schemata" and "world schemata", which refer to the readers' understanding of how hypertext fiction works, and of the "world" of the specific work of hypertext fiction they are reading, respectively.

This idea, of the constant process of each reader's expectations being challenged or confirmed throughout the reading of the text, as effected by the text's use of links, is hence a valuable method for analysing hypertext fiction.

## Chapter 4: Discussion and Analysis

For the protagonist of *WTWLA*, there seem to be two types of failure: one, the failure of breaking out of the oppressive world she lives in; and two, the failure to cope with past and present trauma. While a notable shift can be observed throughout the game, one of moving from helplessness to empowerment, it is nonetheless worth noting how this initial sense of helplessness is created through hypertext game mechanics.

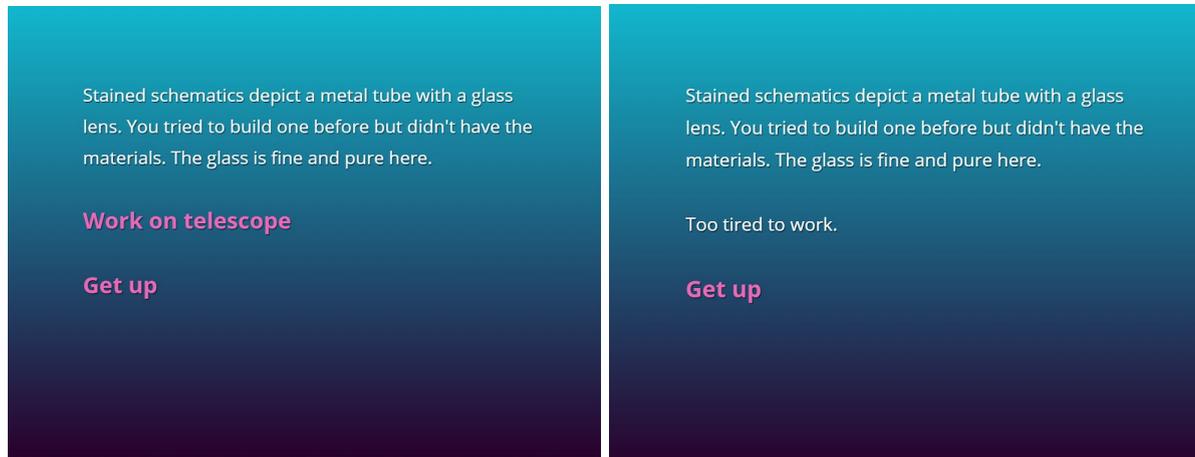
### 4.1 Queerness as No Fun

As many reviewers have noted, the game initially starts off very repetitively, reflecting the daily life of the protagonist, with the reader often forced to reread the same passages depicting scenes in the palace, where the protagonist works, and the city, which the protagonist is able to explore. Among the many "locations" the reader can visit, one of the most important ones is the workshop, from where the reader can click on links (indicated in the rest of this paper with an underline) to do various actions.



*Fig. 1. The "workshop" passage, where clicking on the "melter" or "worktable" links will lead to descriptions of the respective items.*

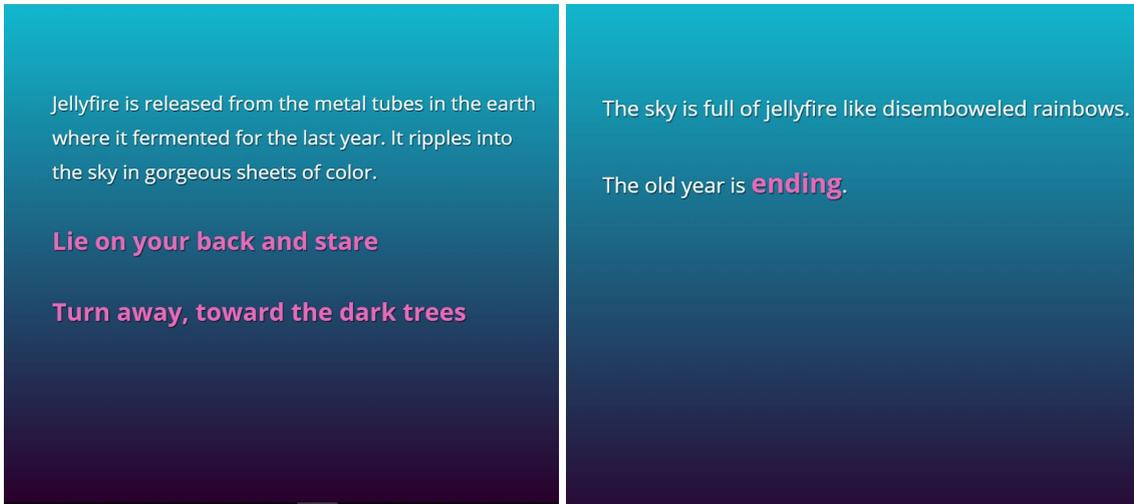
Upon clicking on the "worktable" link, one can then click on the "Work on telescope" link in the following passage. This, however, will only lead to the reader being told that the protagonist is too tired to work.



*Fig. 2 & 3. The “worktable” passage, where clicking on “Work on telescope” leads to the link being replaced with “Too tired to work”.*

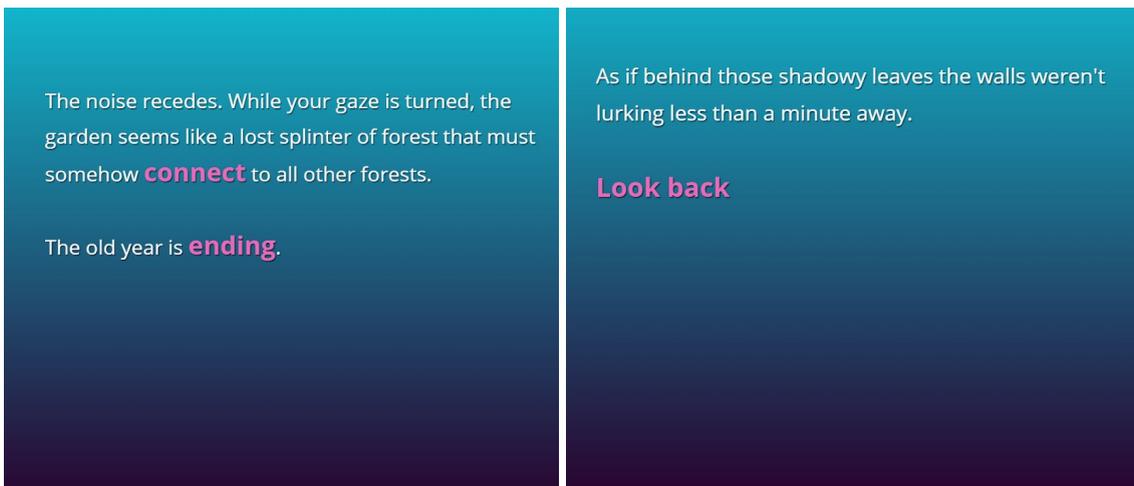
This inability to “work” can be seen as a failure on both the part of the protagonist and the reader, as the link would likely challenge the reader’s text schemata, given that in a typical game, clicking on the link would most likely lead to a separate passage describing the process of working on the telescope. Through the use of such a link, the reader’s sense of agency is compromised, since the reader fails at effecting any change in the game or affecting the protagonist’s actions - a fundamental feature of most works of hypertext fiction. Adding to this failure is a frustrating sense of repetition, because the reader will frequently revisit the “workroom” passage as part of the protagonist’s daily life. That is, if the reader chooses on another “day” for the protagonist to enter her work room, the “Work on telescope” link will still be there. Initially, the reader will be told the same thing repeatedly about the protagonist being too tired, and later on in the game it feels almost at random when the link finally leads to the building of a telescope. Given the uncertainty of what the result of clicking on this link will be, the reader seems to be encouraged to try, and fail, repeatedly, hence causing a sense of frustration that seems to reflect the protagonist’s own.

Beyond experiencing the daily life of the protagonist, however, the game also regularly interrupts the repetition with passages of text describing significant events or flashbacks from the protagonist’s past. One of the first of such events is a New Year ceremony in the palace garden.



*Fig. 4 & 5. During the New Year ceremony, “you” can either choose to “Lie on your back and stare” or “Turn away, toward the dark trees”. Clicking on the first link will lead to the passage on the right.*

In one of the reader’s first choices in the game, the reader can choose to either “lie back” or “turn away” from the ostensibly firecracker-like display going on as part of the ceremony. While choosing the first option leads to a somewhat discomforting description of “disemboweled rainbows”, choosing the second option allows the reader to access one more link, this time the “connect” link, which, when clicked on, leads to a blunt declaration about how the protagonist is trapped in the palace.



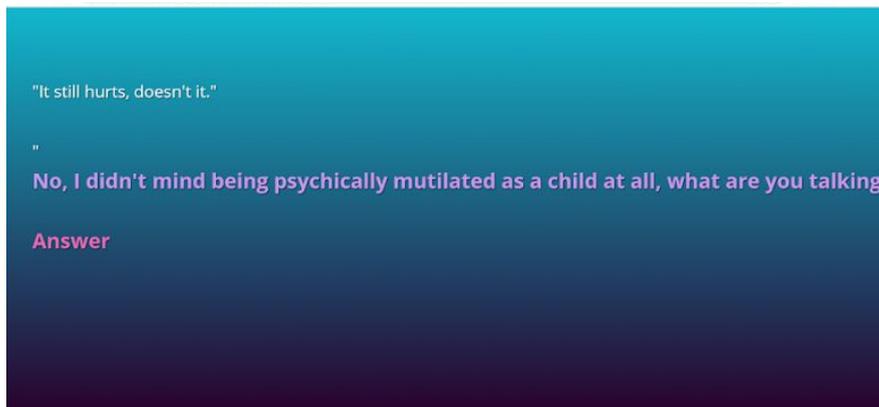
*Fig. 6 & 7. Choosing the “connect” link leads to the passage on the right. “Look back” returns the reader to the passage on the left.*

In this case, the reader’s world schemata is refreshed to highlight the tyranny of the Empress’s rule, as, similar to the first example, clicking on the “connect” link would typically lead to more information about, or even “pathways” to these other forests. Furthermore, the lack of impact the player’s original choice has on the outcome (both choices end with “the old year is ending”) emphasises on a larger scale the reader’s, and the protagonist’s,



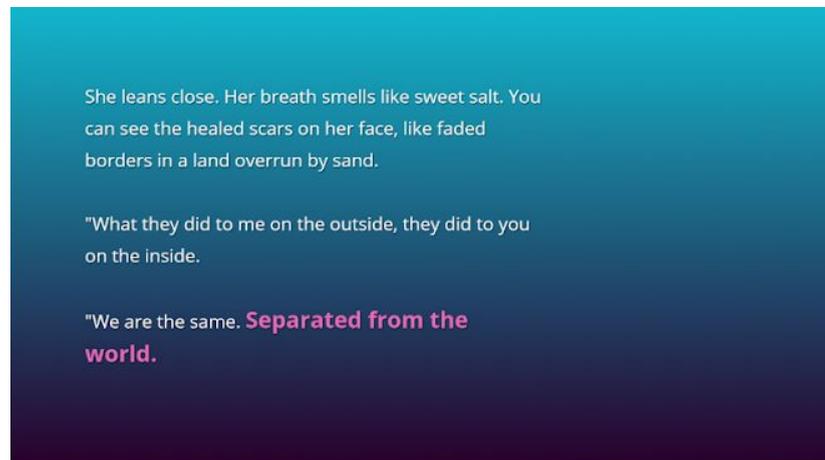
frustrating lack of agency. Thus, besides links that “do not work”, as shown in the first example, links which are unable to change the protagonist’s circumstances are also used to portray queerness as helplessly “no fun”.

However, after Sedina, the protagonist’s friend, enters the palace as a worker halfway through the game, this sense of “no fun” changes. The repetition of “daily life” passages decreases, and increasingly the reader reads passages describing the protagonist’s interactions with Sedina. In these scenes, the protagonist’s trauma, described elsewhere in the game, seems to be more healthily dealt with with Sedina around. After a passage describing a pleasant, joke-filled conversation between the two, where the reader can elicit different comebacks based on which joke they choose for the protagonist to tell, the next passage sees Sedina directly asking the protagonist about how she’s coping with trauma from the past.



*Fig. 8. The purple text is a cycling link, which, upon being clicked on, changes to display something else (in this case, it loops between three sets of text). To move to the next passage, the reader would have to click on the “Answer” link.*

In this case, the purple text originally displays “These things don’t just go away.”, followed by “Yes.” after a click. Upon the second click, the purple text changes to “No, I didn’t mind being psychically mutilated as a child at all, what are you talking about?”. In this case, it is referring to an earlier flashback where, as a child, the protagonist’s dreams are torturously extracted to be sold for consumption by the rich. In contrast with the earlier two sets of purple text, this one is made to be purposefully long, so as to run past the side of the screen, requiring the reader to scroll sideways to read the rest. The sudden change in the length plays with the display limitations of the computer, so as to produce a seemingly comic effect. At the same time, however, the text displayed is horrific and full of sarcasm. Whereas, in earlier scenes where the protagonist is alone, her feelings are simply hinted at, here they come out in full force. Clicking on the “Answer” link leads to a scene where Sedina comforts the protagonist.



*Fig. 9. Sedina comforts the protagonist.*

Read in relation with the following passage, the blow of the protagonist's earlier pained declaration is softened. Just as Sedina has healed, and is able to comfort the protagonist, so will the protagonist be able to heal. Seen in this light, the seemingly comic effect brought about by the abrupt change in the length and tone of the protagonist's possible answer is one that is uneasily reassuring. Moreover, the fact that the reader has the choice to "answer" with such a statement at all can even be read as a cathartic affirmation of the protagonist's methods in struggling to cope. Hence, while the protagonist still has not fully succeeded in overcoming her trauma, the use of the cycling link, and the juxtaposition with the tenderness of the next passage, promises that she will be able to overcome her pain with the support of those around her.

#### **4.2 Queer Failure and Transcendence**

As mentioned earlier, the introduction of Sedina has a large impact on the protagonist's movement from helplessness to empowerment. In this case, queer failure can be seen as the protagonist, and Sedina's, failure to conform to the expectations and regulations of the oppressive society they live in. This "in-game" failure, interestingly, is portrayed in the opposite way through hypertext game mechanics – the scenes, where such a failure to conform occurs, are often designed in such a way as to afford the reader a sense of agency, or a feeling of liberation.

One of the game's most distinct moments takes place when Sedina offers the protagonist a way to temporarily escape from painful memories that have been occupying her. After a sequence where the two take a drug-like substance, the game's colour scheme and music change drastically from its usual dark and moody tone, bringing the reader to a passage declaring that "You feel radiant", which then leads to a passage describing the two characters' immediate reactions.

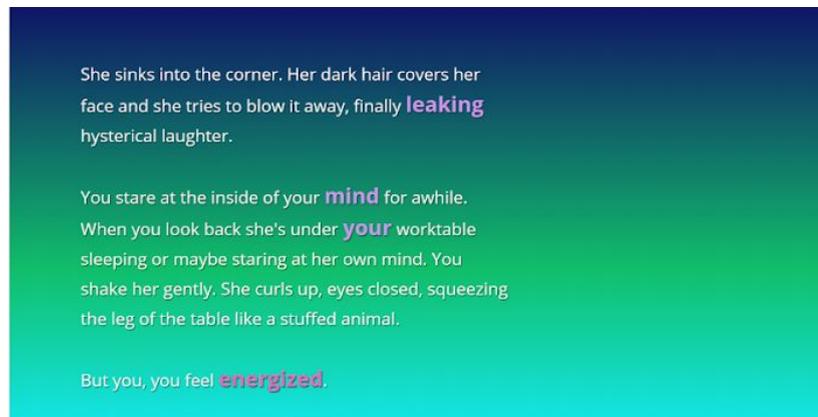


Fig. 10. The “leaking” cycling link loops through “surrendering with”, “becoming” and “enshrining”.

In contrast with the many earlier repeated passages, where the protagonist is mostly waiting for the Empress's orders, if not actually creating objects for the Empress, this passage focuses exclusively on the euphoric experience the two characters share.

This would seem to be an in-game manifestation of Halberstam's original idea of queer failure, where the two characters fail at and break away from the behaviour shown by all the characters leading up to this point (serving the Empress, or otherwise scraping by in fear in the city), with the passage quite divorced in tone from anything else in the game. Instead, their choice to simply enjoy themselves is a seemingly radical rejection of the harsh system of servitude and terror imposed on them by the Empress.

Besides the change in music and colour scheme, the passage also features an unusually high number of cycling links. As opposed to other uses of cycling links in the game, where the reader can only click through sets of text describing the protagonist's bad circumstances or mental state, the texts that the cycling links loop through in this passage are all surreally joyful, with the second and third cycling loops even bringing in some humour, such as when the second cycling loop goes from “mind” to “brain” to “soul” and finally, out of nowhere, “weird psychic meat stuff”. The use of cycling links, hence, allows the reader to freely click through the blissful descriptions. Perhaps, the cycling links also have the effect of reflecting the characters' state of euphoria, as the reader is themselves kept clicking through the happy descriptions.

At the end, the declaration that “you feel energized” contrasts sharply with earlier descriptions of weariness, as shown by the “Work on telescope” link mentioned above. In a sense, then, the reader gets to partake in the rewards that Sedina and the protagonist gain from their “failure”.

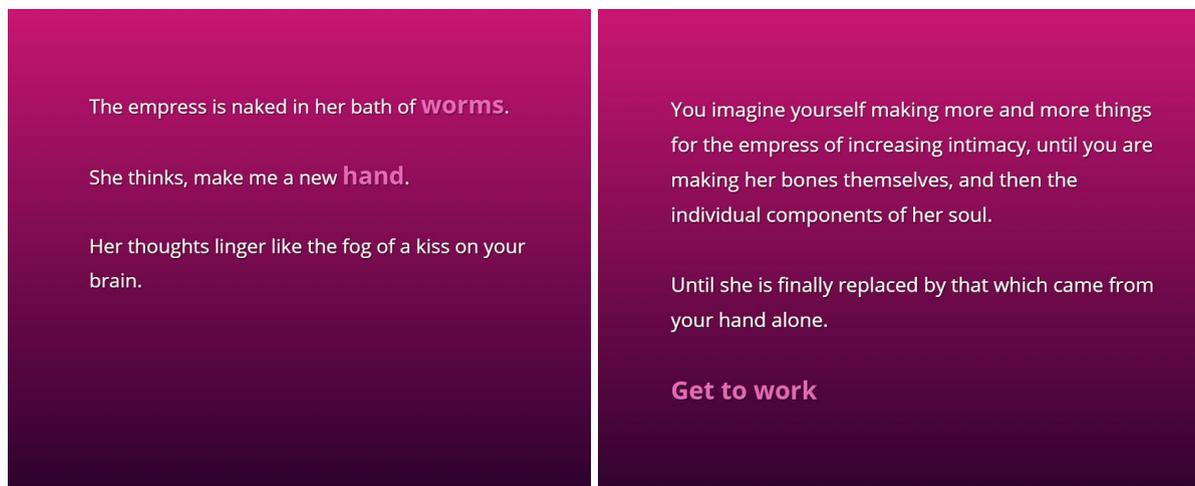
At its most direct, the game does also call upon the reader to fight back against cycles of oppression. Somewhat early on in the game, during a series of passages where the protagonist accompanies the Empress on a violent hunting trip, the game deliver its moral of



the story: “custom[s]... persist because people are scared that if they question the custom they will fall victim to [its] intense cruelty... which persists because they fail to question it”. This type of failure, as Porpentine describes here, is not disruptive to oppression, in the sense that queer failure might be, but simply subservient to it.

However, immediately after the insight of this early passage, this series of passages ends with the protagonist remaining unable to make a change. It is only much later on in the game where the protagonist once again calls for a rejection of the Empress and the cruel system she represents.

In the abovementioned passage, the protagonist witnesses the Empress take a bath, where she requests for the protagonist to make her a new hand. The protagonist immediately begins dreaming of replacing the Empress completely:



*Fig. 11 & 12. Upon being tasked with making a new hand for the Empress, the protagonist imagines creating parts to replace the Empress completely.*

Here, the protagonist’s hypothetical act of creating “components of the [the Empress’s] soul” is directly contrasted with passages earlier in the game, where the protagonist is ordered to create weapons and other ceremonial gifts for the Empress.



*Fig. 13 & 14. The protagonist must create a weapon for the Empress.*

While the protagonist, in creating weapons for the Empress, seems complicit in the Empress' tyranny, the new passages drastically change the meaning and potential of her work, since the protagonist is no longer creating objects to please the Empress, but to undermine her. That is, the protagonist no longer wants to blindly obey, or even keep a fearful distance from, the Empress. Rather, she longs to, through a subtle departure from the monotonous work expected of her, penetrate the Empress's defences and defeat her from within. Hence, in failing to remain submissive under the Empress's rule, the protagonist imagines productive new possibilities for her work, and for the world of the game.

As such, the appearance of the "Get to work" link becomes significant, since its meaning changes significantly with the protagonist's newfound empowerment in mind. "Work", while originally presented as the simple mundane activity of creating objects for the Empress, now takes on the added meaning of putting up resistance against the Empress, hence refreshing the reader's linguistic and world schemata to include the possibility of the latter meaning. Even more importantly, whereas the reader's clicking of the "Get to work" links earlier in the game evoke little sense of freedom, being presented as just another part of the protagonist's duties, the new "Get to work" link seems to be an optimistic call to action for the reader. Just as the protagonist is ready to make a change, the reader's actions seem to gain a renewed sense of purpose, and the clicking of the new link is one that is liberatingly different from earlier links which emphasised the reader's lack of agency.

While the protagonist is presented as literally "failing" in-game, the hypertext mechanics that accompany these passages often evoke the opposite sense for the reader, of joy, hope and liberation, suggesting that it is these forms of queer failure that ultimately allow us to transcend cycles of oppression. Thus, it is through the use of hypertext mechanics that the game successfully encourages the forms of queer failure portrayed in the story.



## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

*With Those We Love Alive* ends with Sedina and the protagonist running away from the city, and vowing to continue fighting from where they are.

Indeed, the game presents a powerful story of marginalised people gradually learning to not only cope with, but to fight an oppressive system together. Using links and other hypertext mechanics, the game not only reflects the pain of their struggle, but also the optimism of their friendship and determination in fighting the system.

Whereas the game initially denies the reader agency to parallel the protagonist's helplessness, the protagonist's turn to queer failure as a means of disrupting the system is celebrated, and indeed, for the reader, presented through the game's hypertext mechanics as exciting and liberating.

Thus, *With Those We Love Alive*, in making this link, empowers not just the protagonist, but the reader, as well, to embrace queer failure.

## **Acknowledgements**

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