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Senior Thesis - Final Written Thesis Paper

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Exploring Relationships, Complex Characters, and Nuanced Minority Experiences within the

Visual Novel Genre

My artistic practice explores diverse relationships amongst minority groups, the idyllic

Midwestern mundane, and accessible play both in and out of video games. By promoting a story

format that's accessible financially and as well as conceptually, players of all backgrounds can

experience a form of casual and positive escapism from the real world. I use video games to tell

stories, create narratives, and develop character studies that not only provoke personal

enrichment, but also betterment and self-realization within the players of my games. The theme

of relationships has been something I've been exploring heavily, particularly platonic and

romantic relationships between minorities of many different races, nationalities, ethnicities, and

LGBTQ+ identities. I like to focus on queer joy and slice-of-life casual play within my games to

generate an idealized feeling that leaves players hopeful for what they can attain in their own

lives and provide a narrative that gives the chance to see the world around them from a new

perspective. With video games as my main medium, I'm able to give my audience a carefully

tailored experience through a specific, directed format.

Player agency and the option of choice is a critical part of my game design practice, as it

allows players to feel like they have a say in how the story takes place, regardless of if there is

only one outcome or not. I am heavily influenced by internet culture, fandom spaces, and the

online community that comes with consuming media. Dating simulators and visual novels, especially ones that center experiences of a historically marginalized cast, are big inspirations in my practice as well. Games like Sad Panda Studio's *Blush Blush*, Game Grumps' *Dream Daddy*, Brianna Lei's *Butterfly Soup*, GB Patch Games' *Our Life: Beginnings and Always*, and Beautiful Glitch's *Monster Prom* have been incredibly inspirational and influential as my artistic practice continues to grow and develop. I've been inspired by the visual layouts of these games, as well as the narratives and character explorations found within each media. Although none of these games are similar in content other than the fact that they are all the same genre, each game tells a different multifaceted story and emphasizes the player's experience, even if the player isn't particularly playing as themselves. The mechanics used to draw the audience into each narrative are varied, alternating between plentiful choices and maximized player agency in the case of *Our Life: Beginnings and Always* or a competitive stat-based multiplayer game mode like the one found in the *Monster Prom* series. Regardless of the way these games were meant to be played mechanically, each one illustrates a unique form of storytelling and character analysis that's not found in less interactive digital media. Generally, consumers of media are simply observers to a story. When watching a movie or reading a book, the consumer is not actively part of the narrative, instead privy to the inner thoughts and outward actions of the characters in the media as an omniscient third-party. When playing a video game, the character the consumer plays as becomes an extension of the self. Not only is the consumer an observer but they are now an active participant. They can become part of the narrative and influence the characters and environments within it directly. The world responds to their actions and bends to their whims. With dating simulators, which allow players to explore fictional romance(s) with a variety of positive and negative outcomes, this feeling of being a catalyst is critical. A topic as personal as

romance and social intimacy has the chance to become immersive quickly. The in-game characters need to realistically flirt, seduce, and date players that may or may not have real-life dating experience. The narrative built around the relationship must be compelling and the player must feel like their voice is being heard not only diegetically but also extraneously by the developers creating the game. I'm inspired by these mechanics and various other aspects within my own game design practice.

Another aspect of game design that has been integral to my practice is the concept of decolonial game design. By examining the power structures within games and the players, characters, and environments that games tend to amplify and prefer, one can realize that many games of all genres have deeply rooted Western-oriented and settler colonialist mentalities written into their narratives. By analyzing and deconstructing these harmful themes, developers and designers can create more inclusive, diverse games that are more welcoming to a wider audience of players. I've been most considering Aaron Trammell's "Decolonizing play," Souvik Mukherjee and Emil Lundedal Hammar's "Introduction to the Special Issue on Postcolonial Perspectives in Game Studies," and Meghna Jayanth's "White Protagonism and Imperial Pleasures in Game Design." In Trammell's "Decolonizing play," he deconstructs the very notion of play, realizing that to create media that's worth playing, black people and people of color need to be centered in the conversation. Historically, much of game design has been produced through the implicit lens of white supremacy and colonialism, so taking down the biased and racialized foundation of what modern game design has been built upon is integral to step forward. Mukherjee and Hammar discuss this same point within their "Introduction to the Special issue on Postcolonial Perspectives in Game Studies," saying that many highly successful games of the past have addressed colonialism, but in a way that instead capitalizes it rather than critiques it.

Games like MPS Labs' *Civilization* and Klaus Teuber's *Catan* encourages players to engage in world expansion and the conversion of native peoples considered to be the "other." Jayanth's "White Protagonism and Imperial Pleasures in Game Design" expands on this idea. After realizing that most video game protagonists are depicted as white and intended for white audiences, moves can be made to decentralize those narratives and to reject the assumption that all video game consumers are white by default. By taking steps to instead amplify historically underrepresented voices in my character designs and narratives, I'm able to put my own stories and feelings into my games, shifting away from the decolonial narrative and into something that promotes diversity and the comfort within it.

The final aspect of research I have been embarking on is the concept of indie video games. With the release of my first video game, a queer, slow-building, Mothman dating simulator titled *Cryptid Coffeehouse*, I've been exploring what it means to be an independent game developer and what dynamics that creates between me, the players of my games, and the video game industry at large. I've been heavily referencing Anna Anthropy's 2012 book *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, which discusses the ways developers and audiences are shifting their thoughts in how they think about and understand video games. By decentering the work methods and endless crunch of the AAA video game industry, I allow myself to explore not only the community that indie video games create among developers, but also the community that spawns from the players of those video games. I've discovered this through the community that has been born through *Cryptid Coffeehouse*—these social groups tend to be tighter, closer-knit, and friendlier than ones for much larger games. Examining that dichotomy is essential to discovering what indie games do to players in their real lives, particularly in the online space. There are

critically important mental and social aspects to even the most seemingly blasé video game, and that's something that I've been deliberating on extensively.

When considering the aspects of the aforementioned research, one can identify several key points: video games can (1) critique and capitalize upon assumed identities and racial stereotypes while also providing social commentary, (2) provide narrative experiences that intentionally immerse one or the extension of oneself in a fictional world and allow them to take those experiences into their real lives, and (3) help build strong connections with like-minded individuals and form community. These three points are important as one views the digital medium of video games through the lens of contemporary art. Social commentary, immersion, and community are all facets of contemporary art that are integral to the experience between the art, the artist, and the consumer. By integrating emotional responses and real-world inspirations, video games can subvert the concept of traditional artmaking by interpolating them with a new media that engages consumers in a more direct and personal way.

My first video game, *Cryptid Coffeehouse*, combines all these influences, interests, and concepts by examining an in-depth romantic relationship through time. By exploring the intricacies of a budding romantic relationship set in a Midwestern environment, I give players the opportunity to experience a romance that could possibly give them hope for their own futures. By juxtaposing the mundane of the Midwest with a colorful cast of characters inspired by cryptids, fantastical creatures, and mythological beings, there's lighthearted fun within the deeper relationship analysis, all while maintaining the game's identity as a casual play experience. Having creatures from folklore and urban legends as character vessels allows me to not only broaden my audience, drawing in fans of these cryptids to indulge in a play style that's not what they usually engage in, but it also gives me the opportunity to investigate urban legends

and cryptids from around the world. By doing so, these fantastical creatures give me the room to create characters full of culture and narrative. The characters within the world I've created in *Cryptid Coffeehouse* are not just "creatures," so to speak. I've intentionally researched the origins of the cryptids and mythological beings that inspire my characters, leaving room for authentic representation of the cultures they come from. By combining racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity with queerness and the deep-rooted world history that's engrained in each legend, *Cryptid Coffeehouse* becomes more than superficially diverse. The game's narrative allows for these multi-racial, multi-ethnic, queer characters to have space to breathe and joy to experience, letting players know that there is room for them not only within the games they play, but also in the world around them. For example, Artemis, *Cryptid Coffeehouse*'s love interest and main character, is Mothman, a cryptid most known for being from West Virginia. I've honored the Mothman legend quite a bit, giving Artemis the last name "Scarberry," the last name of one of the couples that saw Mothman for the first time in 1966, and actively making many references to specific aspects of Mothman legend through the clothes they wear, the hobbies they have, and the world that's built around them. However, I diverted sharply after that. Artemis is nonbinary and uses they/them pronouns exclusively despite being visually masculine. Their humanoid design allows them to be drawn with non-white features, as they're black Arab, specifically Algerian American. Their family is black and their friends that are introduced during the game are all non-white as well. They're queer, but the story doesn't revolve around that fact. They have a tense relationship with their stepmother, but it's not because of their queerness either, instead revolving around the expectations and career aspirations she has for them. All these things allow Artemis to be a very fresh and unique character in a sea of generally white or East Asian, straight, cisgender male love interests with brown or blonde hair. This trend becomes

exhausting for players of color, leaving them craving characters that reflect themselves and the world around them. Decentering the white protagonist, love interest, and supporting cast sets the stage for a new story to be told to even the most experienced visual novel gamers. I believe there are many ways to tell a story, and games in all their forms, digital or physical, can provide an outlet for designers like me to spin carefully woven narratives for their players.

For my thesis, I'm using *Cryptid Coffeehouse* and ideas of casual play, diversity, and relationships in visual novels as a springboard to create a demo of my next full-length video game project. In my new game, *Kurou Connect*, I am writing a narrative that focuses more on character exploration and analysis through a visual experience. The game is meant to be a fuller character realization that explores personality and emotion, while having the opportunity to have more romantically inclined choices. The game is centered around a side character from *Cryptid Coffeehouse*, Kurou Hasegawa. The storyline follows him and the player as they're stranded with each other for 24 hours after Kurou gets his car stolen. *Kurou Connect* features the romantic and/or platonic development of the player and Kurou's relationship through those 24 hours as they wander through the city. The player learns about Kurou, his personality, his family, and his idiosyncrasies, all while attempting to guide Kurou and themselves back home. Players can watch Kurou open up to them as the hours tick by, especially once it hits nightfall and you're forced to find a place to stay for the night.

There is a certain level of stress that is built into *Kurou Connect*, something that isn't found within *Cryptid Coffeehouse*. This is important because the end goal of the game is different— rather than having the end goal be the culmination of a relationship without exterior stressors, the end goal of *Kurou Connect* is to ultimately get home safely. Additionally, Kurou and the player have a love-hate "frenemies" dynamic, allowing players to place themselves in a

role where they are generally friendly with Kurou but still have a fundamental dislike for him and a rivalry with him. This compounds upon itself throughout the course of the game depending on what decisions the player makes during the core loop. There is constant tension during the entire game, and even though the game follows a relatively linear format, the embedded stressors add a sense of urgency that wasn't found within *Cryptid Coffeehouse*. There will be a hidden system of variables in place that will dictate what choices will succeed or what options will be available to you as the game moves on, similar to the way the *Monster Prom* series executes its point-based choice outcome/consequence system. Because of this narrative structure, *Monster Prom*'s replayability increases, allowing players to get more time and more experiences out of the game's story. By limiting the amount of choices, narrative direction, and overall outcomes a player can access in their playthrough and preventing them from unlocking all information incentivizes longer player times, more replays, and more fulfilling play experiences. I plan to integrate this into *Kurou Connect* by adding a deeper and more intricate points system into the framework of the game, thus changing the play experience every time it's started over.

The *Monster Prom* series also excels at incorporating humor into what would typically be read as a complicated and stressful situation. As I embark on the more intensive parts of the game's design, I aim to integrate a playful cheekiness within outcomes of failure, thus allowing players to still feel content with "losing." As with any consumable media, audiences are emotionally attached to the outcomes of the narratives they absorb, whether that be a book, a film, or a video game. Players dedicate time to discovering what a story is about and can feel devastated when things don't turn out the way that they expected. This feeling increases tenfold within video games, particularly ones that have players engage as themselves. Once a player is invited to introduce themselves or an extension of themselves via an original character into the

game, the media's experience becomes incredibly personal. Characters address the player by name, speak to them, and react to decisions they make. By putting themselves in a position where they're the ones directly interacting and influencing the story, success and failure becomes so much more important. An outcome of failure could be a shattering experience, making players want to stray away from replaying the game to get the more positive endings. Within *Kurou Connect*, I'm interested in exploring this phenomenon. The fully realized version of the game will have several different routes and endings, some of them ending in utter failure, but by making those failures still enjoyable through humor and nuanced storytelling, a different feeling arises within players. A bad ending or failure is no longer crushing—it's instead another exciting achievement unlocked.

The same influences I've had from *Cryptid Coffeehouse* translate over to *Kurou Connect* as well, but I am interested in exploring similar narrative forms that are found in video games such as Veritable Joy Studios' *ValiDate*, Team Salvato's *Doki Doki Literature Club!*, and robobarbie's *Blooming Panic*. Exploring a great deal of information during a short period of in-game time is something that these games do well, and I'm inspired by the ways the narratives are written and conveyed to players in a brief in-game moment. Typically, I spend a large amount of time brainstorming what interactions I want the player to have with the main character or what things I want the player to learn about the main character, and then proceed to build a story off those decisions. *Cryptid Coffeehouse* follows this format, but consequently became a lengthy game as I discovered I had more interactions I wanted to explore and expand upon. I wanted to hit big milestones in a relationship— the first kiss, the asking to date, the first love proclamation— while also allowing the players to understand Artemis in a more three-dimensional way through different scenarios and locations that ends up spanning thirteen in-

game weeks. However, as *Kurou Connect* is set in 24 hours, there isn't time for a slow burn of character information. By thinking about what is most important for players to know and learn about Kurou and the game's world throughout the game's runtime, I'll be able to deliver that information concisely and effectively.

By using the digital medium of video games and the visual novel genre, I plan to fully develop a nuanced play experience and character exploration within the demo of *Kurou Connect*. By implementing similar features and mechanics found in the narrative of my game *Cryptid Coffeehouse* and the other visual novels previously discussed, *Kurou Connect* will deliver a unique perspective on short-term relationship building and character analysis not typically found within one's average dating simulator.

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