Rabbit Hole

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“THE RABBIT HOLE”
SELF-DISCOVERY VIA DIGITAL GAMING:
RECLAIMING A MEDIUM

by

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Rabbit Hole:

noun

A Rabbit Hole is a world within someone that always exists, but is not visible to the naked eye. This world collects feelings which one can not process. Most people will only catch glimpses of their individual Rabbit Holes, a little at a time, when they dream. This is why dreams often reflect dormant anxieties. Rabbit Holes can thus be deceptively terrifying, just as our thoughts are. Fears such as – why is my brain telling me this? Is there something wrong with me? Will I ever sleep again? – come from the Rabbit Hole. However, though they are scary, it is essential that we explore Rabbit Holes. Without exploration – i.e., without dreaming – these horrific feelings sit and rot. They fuse to the walls, and indeed, they become a part of you.

But why is this important? If it isn’t visible, can’t we just ignore it?

Inevitably, a person will reach a breaking point. When this happens, your floor will fall away from under you, swallowing you whole into your emotion-filled Rabbit Hole. This is “the fall”, the beginning of your journey. When this happens, you have a choice. There is always an exit in the Rabbit Hole. However, the fall is the beginning of working through everything that sits within you. The Rabbit Hole will always help you realize that you are not horrifying. The hurt that has happened to you is not your fault. Thus, though scary, Rabbit Holes are a path to healing.
DESCRIPTION OF WORK

Rabbit Hole is an interactive fiction game made in the free software Ren’Py, using hand-drawn illustrations and animations brought to life in Adobe Photoshop and After Effects. The game begins with you lying in your bed, unable to sleep. Suddenly, your floor falls away. Your room and its contents are sucked into your “Rabbit Hole.”
You are met by a kind wizard. He explains to you that you have a choice – you can either return to your room, or keep exploring your Rabbit Hole. The wizard says that you will dream if you choose to continue on. He warns you that your dreams will be random, but maybe you will discover what keeps you awake.

If you decide to continue on, you will be faced with one of six random “dreams.” These are animated cutscenes which feature recurring characters and symbols.

In order to randomize these dreams, I wrote simple code with the help of a computer science professor at Harvey Mudd College, Prof. Xanda Schofield. You can see an example of this custom “random” function below.
Rabbit Hole currently consists of four “rooms” (including the cave with the wizard). The rooms function as moments of reflection, which allow the player to decide if they want to continue on with their journey of self-discovery.
The final room within *Rabbit Hole* is the only one which depicts an outdoor scene. Its bright, hopeful color palette and narrative contrast with the previous rooms, signaling that you have processed the anxieties which kept you awake.

There are five possible endings in *Rabbit Hole*. The first four are triggered if you decide to leave, and return to your bed. Depending on how long you have explored the *Rabbit Hole*, your room will be various levels of glitched and distorted. These effects are representative of the disorientation of a bad night's sleep.
However, if you make it through every room within *Rabbit Hole*, you are rewarded with the “true” ending. This one explains that nothing is wrong with you. Thus, though the dreams and visuals within *Rabbit Hole* are disorienting, the play experience illustrates that all people are inherently good, and that mental health issues are a product of external, societal factors.
INTRODUCTION TO THEORY

My thesis is an exploration of a fictional world that I have entitled “Rabbit Hole.”
Though the inner world depicted in my game is my own, the project implies that Rabbit Holes inevitably erupt within a person when they are alone in their rooms at night. Since childhood, I have hated nighttime. Now, I can see that the monsters I feared were actually parts of myself, and were symbolic of things I could not process at the time. Another constant within my tumultuous relationship with nighttime has been my use of digital tools to self-soothe. Not only has this been my primary means of escape, it has offered a way to play with my gender and sexuality. However, I have also felt these tools worsen my insomnia, with tailored ads and algorithms which seem to know my every anxiety, and how to capitalize on them.

Digital spaces have long been shaped by corporations' money-hungry incentives, which inevitably work against the self-discovery and acceptance I found online. Thus, as a queer person representing my internal workings via digital art, it is essential for me to understand how queer self-discovery can be unearthed within the limitations that are (literally) coded into the programs I utilize. Glitch has provided a means of creating outside of these boundaries, as it is a way of breaking outside of the programmer’s expectations. In order to find refuge from sleeplessness, I created this world that reclaims and redefines this nighttime space that has haunted me. Playing through this experience should generate a feeling of hope in players, and show them that technology can allow us to get closer to ourselves.

I tell my story through horrific, metonymic imagery and glitched figures in order to keep this Rabbit Hole as free as possible from the hegemonies of reality. By intentionally utilizing the queer temporalities which exist within the genre of horror, in tandem with the freedom I have found within the disruption of glitch, I depict these uncomfortable and often terrifying emotions
for recuperative purposes. Thus, “Rabbit Holes” utilize horror and glitch as a means of liberation from oppressive gender and sexual hegemonies. Furthermore, they utilize digital spaces against their makers, finding spaces of rest and self-discovery within the very tools that keep us constantly available and awake.

**CRARY: CAPITALISM, TECHNOLOGY & INSOMNIA**

When I began exploring possible causes for my insomnia, I struggled to place what was making sleep feel impossible. I knew that the screens surrounding me were overstimulating and adding to my anxiety, though I struggled to blame them entirely, as I have found refuge within these devices during moments of insomnia since childhood. I wondered if there was a way to separate what was so harmful about technology from the beautiful universes I had discovered through it.

Jonathan Crary’s 2013 work *24/7* allowed me to better understand that I am not the only one experiencing sleeplessness in today’s screen-filled world, nor the only one who feels complicated about my relationship with technology. Crary blames technology’s impact on mental health on the emergent nonstop work ethic of twenty-first century capitalism. The art critic and essayist describes the recent modeling of one’s identity to conform to the uninterrupted operation of our economy. He illustrates how sleep provides one of the biggest threats to contemporary capitalism, as it poses “the idea of a human need and interval of time that cannot be colonized and harnessed to a massive engine of profitability” (Crary 16). Sleep has continued to be eroded by capitalistic incentives, resulting in us viewing sleep as something to manage rather than relish. Increased access to technology leaves us in a sort of “sleep-mode” ourselves, always in a low-power readiness to check our email or ensure we have not missed a deadline (Crary 18).
DIGITAL SPACE

Crary explains how digital technology amplified the assault on individual people’s free time. He describes how “the rise of neoliberalism, the marketing of the personal computer, and the dismantling of systems of social protection” redefined individuals as full-time agents of productivity (Crary 73). Though cyberspace was at first heralded as having the power of remaking and self-discovery, it soon “became clear that though cyberspace was, in fact, a reinvention of the self, it was transnational corporations doing the reinventing and transforming” (Crary 76). Enterprises such as Google and Facebook normalized unbroken engagement with screens that constantly demand response. Though this began with television, the last thirty years have muddied the boundary between digital and physical space.

Crary’s 24/7 showed me the importance of Rabbit Hole existing digitally. Because erasing these tools entirely is not possible in today’s screen-based world, exploring one’s “Rabbit Hole” illuminates essential questions. How can I turn my computer from a tool of absolute availability into one that prioritizes my needs? How can I be surrounded by screens, yet refuse to engage with their ceaseless demands? Thus, Rabbit Hole is an example of how to engage with technology, while fighting against digital capitalism’s algorithms and code. In order to do this, I turn to other tools of disruption which have proven to be effective in media, primarily horror and glitch.

GLITCH

It is here where Glitch Feminism by Legacy Russell has been very important in the thematic and aesthetic development of my thesis, as Russell discusses how we need glitch, animalia, or other non-humanness in order to begin to represent humans effectively. This work, a
collection of mini-manifestos and art criticism essays, takes us back to Russell’s experience growing up during the emergence of the internet as a Black queer person. Russell describes their time online in childhood integral to finding their “first connection to the gendered swagger of ascendancy, the thirsty drag of aspiration. My ‘female’ transmogrified.” They discuss how nowadays, the concept of internet-as-utopia is a naive, romantic view of today’s technologies.

Russell expands on Crary’s explanation of cyberspace as a “reinvention of the self.” Though the early days of the internet were full of possibility, cyberfeminists gradually grew disillusioned as they saw the internet digitally reconstruct the hegemonies that exist in tangible reality. However, Russell insists upon the reclamation of digital tools. It may seem counterrevolutionary to utilize digital spaces for this, as theorists such as Audre Lorde emphasize looking outside of the master’s tools when attempting to dismantle the master’s house (Lorde). However, Russell calls for a mutiny in the form of strategic occupation, and they point to the glitch as a source of inspiration. The glitch – unprogrammable by definition – is a disruption to the algorithms built by those in power, and creates a space “which new possibilities of being and becoming manifest.” This illuminated the necessity of including glitch in my thesis, and using it as a tool to show progression through *Rabbit Hole*.

All digital spaces are “a vessel through which a ‘becoming’ can realize itself” (Russell). Within it, we are untethered to our physical bodies, as well as the assumptions society makes about us because of them, Though the extent to which one can explore is limited by the building-blocks of these online spaces, glitch gives artists working digitally a means of breaking out of the limitations which are coded into the medium. I experiment with glitch when it naturally comes up in my work, as I frequently stretch the boundaries of any program I use. Whether it be exporting my videos in certain formats, which causes them to stutter and break
apart, or the irregularities which occur when I scan my paintings and drawings, glitch permeates my work.

DIGITAL GAMES

Video games are the medium which showed me the true possibilities of self-exploration within technology. Creating avatars of various genders, installing mods that allowed me to create any character I could picture, and watching “glitch hunting” videos where players try to find loopholes within a game’s code showed me how technology can be utilized outside of a programmer’s expectations. However, I saw how steep the barrier to entry is with game development. I am not a mathematician, and computer animation is challenging enough to take on for a final project. However, after taking a computer science course at Harvey Mudd College, I felt empowered to poke around with a fairly simple, free game development software called Ren’py. Realizing that digital game-making can be made accessible, I began to wonder what the video game industry could look like if more people felt empowered to enter it.

This curiosity led to me to Anna Anthropy’s concept of “video game zinesters.” Anthropy – another queer expert in the digital – discusses the importance of indie game development in the face of the massive studios that currently dominate the industry. In her book Rise of the Videogame Zinesters, Anthropy draws attention to how behind video game culture is, particularly for such an inherently queer medium. It is one where you can create avatars, traverse and interact with others in any way you desire, yet video game communities are historically unaccepting of difference.

AAA games – high-budget, high-profile games with the most complex technology and respected storytelling in the industry – continue to be geared towards straight male audiences.
Anthropy explains that there is a “culture of alienation” present within video games. Not only is the technology used for game creation inaccessible (though the internet is slowly changing this), everything from controller design to navigating digital spaces is gatekept and designed with experienced gamers in mind. This excludes potential players who were not the target audience of these video games from a young age.

Anthropy also criticizes these games for being repetitive, not just thematically, but in design. When you only create video games where men are shooting at other men, not only is representation limited, but there remains “a vast pool of experiences that contemporary videogames are failing to tap.” This is because video games – and all of cyberspace – remain created and controlled by the same “transnational corporations” that Crary points to, who have monopolized these spaces of “reinventing and transforming” (Crary 76).

To counteract this, Anthropy calls on queer people to make video games. These games do not have to be perfect, but there should be enough of them that video games can become decentralized. We have slowly seen this appear with the rise of indie games, but I am shocked at the small amount of change in video game culture despite Anthropy’s book having been written a decade ago. Writings from these theorists of the digital have inspired me to tap into new kinds of emotion within video games, in order to emulate the digitized queer experiences that brought me closer to myself in childhood. Furthermore, Anthropy’s call for the decentralization of this medium emphasized the importance of placing a video game within an art historical context.

Anthropy connects comics and games, pointing out that “comics are still involved in a debate, as videogames are, about their cultural and artistic value.” This connection is integral to my thesis, as using comic art in a video game displayed in a gallery setting alludes to both mediums as worthy not only of being art, but being an art that represents everyone. However,
though I have seen comic aesthetics be accepted by some fine art spaces, people do not often think of narrative games as “art.” I believe this is due to the aforementioned “vast pool of experiences” that games have failed to tap into. *Rabbit Hole*, in contrast to most games which dominate the industry, utilizes a mixture of tangible and digital mediums in an attempt to place it within art history.

**DRAWING, HORROR COMICS**

Though my final game is digital, every illustration within it is done by hand, with ink on paper. I scan these drawings, and bring them to life with Adobe Photoshop and After Effects. This process is an example of how we can begin to interact with technology more intentionally. We can live our lives, and find creative joy away from our screens. Then, we can use technology to enhance, or capture this joy, and find freedom outside of the restraints we encounter within digital capitalism.

My ink drawings utilize aesthetics commonly found in horror comics. While creating my illustrations and animations, I felt that horror – when combined with glitch – provided a more powerful means of expressing queer experimentation than either medium would alone. There is much media theory written about the queer nature of horror. In *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Comics, Games and Transmedia*, Matt Curtis Linton reads female monstrosity through the lens of Barbara Creed’s “monstrous feminine.” Though femininity is traditionally talked about within the context of the victim, Creed illustrates that femininity is, in actuality, terrifying from a patriarchal perspective. Using the example of Jean Grey from Marvel’s *Uncanny X-Men* series, who develops her insidious powers during puberty, Linton describes how Creed’s theory illustrates the feminine as the prototype for depictions of monstrosity (Shail, et. al.). By raising
up this image of the female monster, Creed’s theory shows how the fear she invokes provides a space for women to subvert traditional gender expectations.

This is why subversion of gender is often shown in horror – the thought of these roles which are so deeply ingrained in our lives being a mere construct brings up visceral feelings of discomfort. Creed’s analysis allows for power to exist for women in a medium like comic art where they have been egregiously sexualized for a predominantly straight male audience. However, Creed’s theory depends upon very traditional definitions of femininity. To contrast, in depictions of my “Rabbit Hole” all creatures are androgynous. There are many moments where the body is illustrated horrifically, whether it be a gaping hole appearing on a figure's back, or fleshy growths spilling out of cracks in the walls. In refusing to assign gender to these bodies, I am pushing Creed’s theory beyond the male-female binary. Not only is femininity monstrous and terrifying, people born into female bodies can claim monstrous power through their masculinity, or their refusal to align with any gender.

An example of a comic artist who utilizes body horror through androgyyny is Charles Burns. Often, before drawing, I will flip through Black Hole, a collection of work published by Burns between 1995 and 2005. This project depicts the fallout of a sexually transmitted disease that causes horrific, trippy mutations in adolescents. Burns’s work was ahead of its time, as he depicts both men and women with equal concern as they develop into adulthood. Both genders are just as likely to catch the so-called ‘bug,’ thus women are not the primary victims in this story, nor are they monsters (Shail, et. al.).

Academics such as the University of Oregon’s Kom Kunyosying have pointed to Burns’s “deconstructing human/nonhuman binaries,” particularly through metonymy, or “representing one thing by way of its proximal concrete relation to another thing…first deployed over a
century ago by naturalist writers interested in the animal aspects of humans” (Kunyosying). Burns’s style has shown me how I can effectively illustrate my fears and insecurities as a queer person. His art has given me a reference point for depicting genderless bodies in a horrific context. Because of Black Hole’s influence on my illustrations, I was able to push Creed’s idea of the “monstrous feminine” further by showing how androgynous depictions of horrific mutations can empower queer bodies. These places of experimentation and play help detach us from what we expect bodies to look and act like, and help us find the joy of living, even in a terrifying world. Though Burns only describes his work as being about the horrors of growing up – another theme integral to Rabbit Hole – a more contemporary view of this work can read Black Hole as being full of queer signaling. His deconstruction of the body through metonymic imagery is something I frequently utilize when crafting my characters, via animalia, glitch and nontraditional depictions of gender.

**PAINTING AND INSTALLATION**

Ink is not the only tangible medium utilized in Rabbit Hole. There are also multiple animated “dreams” within Rabbit Hole that place my digitally animated creatures above backdrops of watercolor and oil paint. Furthermore, my final game was displayed in a gallery, within a sprawling installation. In placing my work within a gallery space, I assert that video games are a means of seeing oneself. Using movable walls found within the Ruth Chandler Williamson gallery, I constructed a room.
I painted the entirety of the space’s interior black, covered the roof with black tarp, and hung blackout curtains at the entrance. Using a glossy white paint, I illustrated a bedroom on three of the four walls, and set up the projector and controller so the game could be played by gallery visitors on the final wall. I depicted the darkness of the space as dripping out of the room. I placed the *Rabbit Hole* within an installation of amorphous drawings, not only to show how *Rabbit Holes* work their way into one’s reality, but to show that digital space is working its way into the art historical canon.
Visitor Standing at “Bedside Table” of Rabbit Hole, where Controller is Fixed
EMOTIONAL SELF-PORTRAITURE

When thinking of depictions of internal worlds which have cemented themselves within art history, I found myself drawn to one of my favorite paintings – Hieronymous Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. This oil triptych, painted in the Netherlands in the early 16th century, shows Biblical stories of creation and damnation via disturbing, surreal imagery. To me, Bosch’s illustrations feel reminiscent of horror comics, in that they seem to be desperately trying to communicate ephemeral feelings of un-belonging, shame and guilt. My references to this work are in my composition, and in the genre of my piece. Bosch’s work is often interpreted as an early emotional self-portrait, the exact artistic genre I would consider *Rabbit Hole* to be a part of.

Author and art historian Hans Belting sees the work as a self-portrait of Bosch himself. He offers a perspective on the center panel as a utopia. Within this panel, we see fantastical creatures and structures littering a bright landscape, hopeful and teeming with life. Numerous human figures enjoy a wide range of Earthly pleasures, what Belting calls an “unspoilt and immoral existence.” Belting saw the middle panel as a representation of the world if Adam and Eve were never banished from Eden, and humanity was allowed to flourish within this paradise. Thus, the rightmost depiction of Hell is disheartening – it is as though Bosch tried to imagine a world where he could freely explore his desires, and then on the right depicted what would happen to him for craving the so-called “Earthly delights” of the middle panel.

In this way, my thesis is a reclamation of delight. In recontextualizing imagery that has historically represented shame and horror, and placing it in conversation with the hopeful narrative of *Rabbit Hole*, my work shows people that they are not inherently full of sin.
inclusion of Bosch as a reference works in tandem with my graphic style, allowing the viewer to see how ever-present these themes of shame and self-hatred are within art that disturbs.

While building Rabbit Hole, I have continued to return to the Garden of Earthly Delights for compositional inspiration. Thinking of my work as an “emotional self-portrait” has allowed me to think of the landscapes I paint as representative of the internal. Furthermore, I appreciate that referencing Bosch has placed my work within the art historical canon. As Anthropy calls our attention to, video games (and even comics) are not treated with the same urgency as other art forms. However, it is urgent that we see ourselves in this medium, perhaps more so than any other, as we are quickly losing these powerful tools of worldbuilding to those in power.

**CHALLENGING OPINIONS ON GEN-Z**

By creating a digital portrait of my own inner turmoil, I am making a commentary on the importance of self-discovery in the online age. Though social media has opened up the world for us, it is also blamed for radicalizing us with “online…echo chambers” and filling us with a need for instant gratification (Seymour). There is judgement surrounding Gen-Z’s seeking comfort in digital spaces – even the most open-minded individuals who were born before the mid-90’s point to our upbringing as increasing rates of suicides and mass shootings (Vigo). There is acknowledgement that these tools have harmed us, yet a lack of understanding that it is the master – not the tool – which is to blame. As Russell and Crary remind us, capitalist incentives co-opted these tools of endless self-discovery. I am seeking radical possibilities within my generation’s “chronic onlineness.” By showing how digital space *can* be used to process our emotions, I show how it is currently failing to be used this way.
POLITICAL RELEVANCE

I hope *Rabbit Hole’s* commentary on insomnia (and all mental health struggles) as a byproduct of turning away from oneself within digital capitalism will illuminate how we are not protected by the current masters of this technology. Crary’s work describes how sleep has consistently been dependent on society. He does so by citing Enlightenment works such as Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, in which Hobbes’ claims that one of the most rudimentary obligations of “the commonwealth is to provide security for the sleeper, not only from actual dangers but – equally important – from anxiety about them” (Crary 30). Looking at works from the seventeenth century helps us see how the relationship between property and sleep was first formed. Furthermore, it illuminates how this unofficial contract between the commonwealth and the working class was broken and forgotten.

Thus, the current cyber-climate does not just pose a threat to our personal happiness, but the effectiveness of modern democracy. Political theorists such as Hannah Arendt posit that, for an individual to be a part of an effective democratic system, private life must remain distinct and separate from the “individual pursuit of material happiness” (Crary 26). This “24/7” mentality also removes progress as a possibility, as it erases the “pretense that time is coupled to any long term undertakings” (Crary 15). This explains the neoliberal mindset that radical change is impossible. Furthermore, this shows that sleep, in today’s context, is representative of the durability of social life, and that “sleep might be analogous to other thresholds at which society could defend or protect itself” (Crary 29). Thus, these individual “Rabbit Holes” do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they have the power to come together and make cyberspace the space of exploration and remixing it was once dreamed to be. My work encourages digital escapes as a means of turning towards, rather than running from, ourselves. It posits this exploration as
non-optional should we ever hope to reclaim these powerful tools. Though they currently suffocate us, *Rabbit Hole* shows they have the potential to work against the oppressive, ever-present control of modern-day capitalism.

**QUEER POSSIBILITIES IN GAMING**

I view much of the art that influences me through a queer lens, though it may not be the creator’s intention for it to be seen as such. I have drawn aesthetic inspirations from Burns, and superhero comics. I continue to lean towards masculine avatars and media geared towards straight male audiences, utilizing them in ways the developers do not intend (this is another way to “glitch” media’s purpose, without having to scour for bugs within code). This is due to the lack of queer media available. However, these depictions would inevitably be more poignant for queer audiences if they were created by queer people intentionally carving out space for themselves. As Anthropy reminds us, queer people must make games, no matter how glitchy, broken and “unprofessional” they may seem. These video game “zines” are an important part of taking back tools of digital creation.

**CONCLUSION**

The interactivity of a digital game nods to what *Rabbit Hole* is truly about. Within cyberspace, we have all felt things happening to us. Though we control the mouse and keyboard, we have no say over the advertisements and pop-ups which flood our vision, pulling us down rabbit holes which force us away from ourselves. Social media companies create algorithms meant to chain us to our screens, seeing us as mere eyeballs they can commodify. However, in your *Rabbit Hole* you have control. You may return to your bedroom at any point, though it may mean you sacrifice some sleep, as you are turning away from all that scares you. Progressing
through the game is not necessary. However, if you choose to, you may begin to see the beauty and self-discovery digital tools can offer. *Rabbit Hole* is a utopia I created which prioritizes my needs, and shows others the beauty of self-discovery within technology. By bringing tangible mediums to life within a game, I place gaming on an equal playing field with painting and drawing. This is a world where one can see themselves without the limitations of capitalistic reality, liberated by the queer possibilities within horror and glitch.
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