

Queer Reorientations in Visual Novels: *Our Life: Beginnings & Always*' Meaningful Choices

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Abstract

This paper explores the queer potential of visual novels by proposing a felt, affective space between player, interface, and game world. With attention to *Our Life: Beginnings & Always* (GB Patch, 2020) and its intentional and reorienting choices which demand a player reflect on their experience of both their and their player character's gender, I highlight the way queer visual novels like *Our Life* use this felt space to reach for and compellingly touch the player. This is made possible due to the adaptation of formal qualities of visual novels out of Japan played by modern English-language developers, and players' critical engagement with the gendered tropes and norms of visual novels. I offer an analysis of scenes in *Our Life* which actively refuse a cisheteronormative default for the player character, making use of the game world's summertime utopia to create an anxiously soothing narrative that is excitingly queer.

Keywords

Visual novel; queer; affect; embodiment; otome; *Our Life: Beginnings & Always*



Introduction

On the Itch.io page for *Our Life: Beginnings & Always* (2020), developer GBPatch introduces the game as a “nostalgic visual novel” that is “near-fully customizable.” It is further tagged and described as a visual novel, a dating sim, interactive fiction, and as a “feel-good simulation,” with genre tags as varied as “otome,” “Gay,” and “Meaningful Choices.” This simultaneously broad and specific taxonomy is typical for a genre that sells itself on customization and designed opportunities for personal engagement. GBPatch’s use of “simulation” in *Our Life*’s description reflects the kind of roleplay the game emphasizes: The interpersonal and social play common to romantic visual novels where players make text-based choices to build relationships with non-player characters (NPCs).

Our Life is emblematic of an ongoing development in indie, English-language visual novels that prioritizes customization through active and inescapable embodiment. Players not only make decisions about player character actions but make self-reflective choices which foreground a customizable style of roleplay that refuses an experiential default and moves, truly, beyond representation (Shaw and Ruberg, 2017). This personal form of play is redirected at the player as an experiencing and reflective subject. The result is a game experience that is excitingly and deliberately queer.

While there are several LGBTQ+ characters in *Our Life*’s cast, and the main potential love interest is canonically demisexual (as opposed to a so-called playersexual love interest), *Our Life*’s queer play mainly comes through in its design. It not only draws the player into queerly reflecting on their character’s embodiment and their own play, but also in the way it returns the playful touch of clicking and reading the game screen, reaching back for the player through a formal, and queered, repositioning of the player’s relational position to the game interface and virtuality. In this way, *Our Life* makes good on the *queer potential* of the visual novel.

I use “queer” here in a way that is both specific and overflowing with multiplicities. This is a queerness that is fundamentally anti-normative, political, and often radical, and which functions as a counter to the hegemonies that try to define and limit play, structure, and self-experience in game design and culture. Colleen Macklin (2017) finds “traces of queerness—or at least its potential” (p. 255) in games, in their characters, in their stories, and further believes that “games are predisposed toward queer explorations” because “they provide us with a notably different way of looking at and living in the world” (pp. 256-257). Bo Ruberg (2019) sees a “common ethos” in games and queerness: “[A] longing to imagine alternative ways of being.” They argue that “playing queer ... can be seen as a transformative practice that reframes and remakes games from the inside out” (p. 1). That is, queerness in games is an active *otherwise*. When I describe the queer

potential of a visual novel, then, I am highlighting the genre's capacity for non-normative game playing and game making as well as its ability to provoke queer imaginings in the players who love them.

Queer potential emphasizes that visual novels are not, themselves, inherently queer; they instead have a unique generic capacity to not only tell queer stories representationally but to tell ludic stories queerly. Freely available software and active online communities make visual novels as a form accessible to nascent and amateur game developers and designers. This ease of use and distribution further ensures that visual novels can be played by almost anyone on almost any device. This leads to a greater sense of diversity and personal storytelling in games that can be created and shared by almost anyone.

I would argue that *Our Life* is in part influenced by Ruberg's queer games avant-garde (2020): A "rising tide of indie games being developed *by*, *about*, and often *for* LGBTQ people [which lays] its own claim to the medium for people who have traditionally been made to feel unwelcome, invisible, or even unsafe in games" (p. 3). Deliberate and disruptive attention to the playing body in a visual novel like *Our Life* not only makes space for queer roleplay but also for queer interventions and transformations in the familiar process of play and occupying play space, where queerness is more than representation; that is, more than the inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters and storylines.

Queerness in games and game studies that moves beyond representation participates in an ongoing "paradigm shift" (Shaw and Ruberg, 2017, p. xiii) that not only imagines alternate futures and alternate paths to a future but participates in an active and ongoing practice of queer worldmaking. Spencer Taylor Berdiago Ruelos (2018), drawing from José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*, describes this practice as one which "allows us to strive beyond the here and now to imagine alternate modes of being and feeling" (p. 37). This is an intervention that aligns with Edmond Y. Chang's (2017) challenging "optimism" (p. 21) in queergaming that demands "full, dimensional, consequential, variegated, and playable queer experiences, lives, bodies, and worlds" (p. 22). Chang's queergaming asks: "How might we think about ways to play games and make games that recognize and work around the limitations and flexibilities of digital computers, player expectations, and the 'playing it straight' cultures at large?" (pp. 15-16) Engagement with these "cultures at large" or dominant modes of play and playful identity-making in roleplaying games and visual novels is vital to *Our Life*'s storytelling and gameplay. As I will discuss below, while *Our Life* is itself a deliberately comforting and nostalgic story and experience, it simultaneously challenges dominant modes of family, gender, and sexual identity through its use of generic and formal norms, inviting players to imagine themselves otherwise or experience a sense of self in spaces where they might otherwise be erased.

To illustrate the queer potential of the visual novel form, I will further contextualize visual novels in the contemporary indie game design community, establishing the genre as fluid and the queer visual novel as a conceptual if not (yet) discrete category. I will then explore the narrative felt space between player, interface, and game in order to interrogate the potential it offers for queer reorientations. I argue that these reorientations are in part possible because of the visual novel's play style, which will be made clear through an examination of Aubrey Anable's (2018) affective explorations of hands and interface and Brendan Keogh's (2018) embodied literacy and body-game assemblage. Finally, I will analyze two scenes from *Our Life* through this lens to understand the positioning of the player in their actual and virtual body and their relationship to gender—their own and otherwise.

Visual Novels as a Queer Form

To understand how *Our Life* queerly reaches for the playing body, we need to both develop and trouble our understanding of visual novels as a formal genre. Mark Kretzschmar and Sara Raffel (2023) define visual novels as “story-driven games that employ interactive elements, allowing the player to influence the story and characters” (p. 3). They further identify three significant generic elements: A unique blend of procedural or ludic elements to create a meaningfully interactive experience; emphasis on narrative and storytelling in a way that “can transport the gamer into the story” (p. 4) and which encourages replayability; and a mixing of genres, vertical intertextuality, and memory to tell complex stories. Vitally, visual novels are told through a combination of player character dialogue and dialogue choices (as seen in roleplaying games more broadly) as well as textual narration, making narrative style itself a signifier of genre tones and norms. Kretzschmar and Raffel highlight the role of self-reflection and the relationship between self and play: Narration in visual novels can “[train] us to listen,” not only to character dialogue “but perhaps even our own ruminations and desires as we insert ourselves into the stories and make choices if given the opportunity” (p. 6).

While Kretzschmar and Raffel's attention is to the visual novel as a Japanese game form and genre, I argue that we also see meaningful formal innovation in the English-language reinterpretation of the form. As *Our Life's* myriad of tags on Itch.io suggest, contemporary visual novels made outside of Japan see more genre blending than Kretzschmar and Raffel identify. The aesthetic and mechanical influences remain clear and, indeed, are lovingly highlighted. Kretzschmar and Raffel, among others (Ganzon, 2025, p. 317), define *ōtome* games as their own genre and dating sims as a visual novel sub-genre. Games like *Our Life*, however, use the cultural and playful expectations of these genres, implied by the use of their aesthetics and formal qualities, to not only draw in players attracted to these qualities, but to pry open queer spaces for players to immerse themselves in.

Part of the reinterpretation work of visual novels takes place through English-language visual novels' engagement with the space made by styles of narration. I propose that visual novels actively place the player in a combined actual and virtual space between interface, subjective experience, and body, creating a vital and active positionality that, in part, makes an enticing visual novel experience possible. Drawing on Rob Shields' (2003) virtuality, I define this as a felt space, realized in both actual body and virtual body, where queer visual novels in particular make use of the player's positionality to define and redefine perspective and narrative point of view. Queer visual novels can therefore disrupt the player's sense of self and facilitate what feels like an eminently personal engagement with a game, building on the already vital sense of immersive investment in the fictional world of the visual novel (Kretzschmar and Raffel, 2023, p. 19). To investigate this sense of the personal and of personal engagement, I focus on romantic/emotional play and how these narrative imperatives are tied to self-representation and self-exploration in *Our Life*. This facilitates an examination of how queer visual novels can distinguish between, rather than conflate, a player and/or character's experience of their gender and sexuality.

Using Sara Ahmed's articulation of queer positionality in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), I further argue that a virtual sense of spatial intervention deliberately and queerly reorients the player's embodied experience of gender and sexuality beyond the fictional game space. In *Our Life*, this is enacted through narrative provision for meaningful choices that refuse a heteronormative default: A player must deliberately "play straight" or cisgender or allosexual, bringing to consciousness a felt experience that is often assumed to be unconscious. At the same time, this makes space for the very conscious imagining a queer player does by virtue of existing otherwise. The result is a profound refusal of a binary in both play and experience, which reflects the affective, space-making interventions queer players paratextually perform in their roleplay in other game genres (Harper, 2017).

The (Queer) Visual Novel

The contemporary English-language visual novels that I broadly consider here pay either explicit or instinctual homage to Japanese visual novels through anime-style art and an emphasis on immersive narration, as noted by Kretzschmar and Raffel (2023). This tendency serves as an example of Dani Cavallaro's anime-visual novel production feedback loop (2010). The popularization of *ōtome* or "maiden" dating sims for young girls and women (see Ganzon, 2025; 2018) during, after, and through the contemporary forms of "Cool Japan" marketing (Kretzschmar and Raffel, 2023, p. 64) seems to have provided indie developers, broadly speaking, formal and aesthetic inspiration for creating versions of the personal, emotional stories seen in *ōtome* and visual novel games. Although the form remains relatively neglected in games scholarship, visual novels are grounded in their attention to emotional connection

and investment (Kretzschmar and Raffel, 2023, p. 108), and *ōtome* games combine interpersonal storytelling with ludic narratives for a presumed female audience (Ganzon, 2025, p. 315). The result of this feedback loop of game consumption, development, and appreciation are two distinct uses of *ōtome* in English-speaking online communities and game stores.

The current English use of “otome” (a further anglicization of the romanization of 乙女ゲーム: *ōtome*) as a genre tag tends to denote a less gendered play and storyline: Many otome English-language visual novels on Itch.io, Steam, and on mobile devices, for example, allow the player to choose their character’s pronouns and are likely to include LGBTQ+ dateable characters in the cast. As such, there is a growing divide between *ōtome* and otome games, with some designers instead using the tag “amare” in response to this ongoing evolution. Amare, drawn from the Latin “to love,” tells stories that foreground “diversity and inclusivity” and makes space “for all relationships”. Community members take this further and say that amare games have a “tone or style [that] is respectful and treats its characters and story with care.” Furthermore, amare games “explore interpersonal relationships, with a focus on romance but allowing platonic ones as well, made by diverse creators for diverse players” (Jimenez, 2021)—a distinct development from *ōtome* and romantic visual novel roots. The category amare recognizes an ongoing shift in visual novel development that foregrounds diverse experiences, the simulation of interpersonal relationships beyond the romantic, and non-normative personal play.

Unlike traditional dating sims, which tend to highlight erotic experiences and emphasize meeting certain implicit goals to earn a simulated relationship with a non-player character (Kretzschmar and Raffel, 2023; Taylor, 2007), I argue that amare and otome games can be seen as a response to these genre norms, with a somewhat radical attention to familial relationships, platonic relationships, and explorations of self and identity through narratives that are intended to be somehow deeper in their emotional engagement. While erotic and romantic content remain vital to the romantic and otome visual novel broadly, there is an attempted intervention in these games and game-making practices to create and transform a sense of playing and playable space.

This turn in visual novel development highlights a fundamental and exciting potential of the visual novel as a game form and genre: A potential to not only tell LGBTQ+ stories, but to facilitate queer engagement with visual novel gameplay that centers diverse, self-reflective, experiential, embodied, queer roleplay. Narration is not only participatory in visual novels but affectively reaches back and re-positions the player as an experiencing subject. A queer visual novel then is a visual novel which fulfills the queer potential of the genre by explicitly asking the player to reflect on their and/or the player character’s experience of their own queerness. The asking, explicit and

playful, is itself a queer mechanic and can transform the “what ifs” of reflective roleplay into a direct and active non-assumption on the part of the game. The asking transforms play into a critical, reflective process that is informed by player action rather than intervening to inform player experience. As I will discuss, GB Patch’s *Our Life* explicitly asks the player to reflect on their own body. While a cisgender and/or heterosexual experience is certainly available, it is not assumed as a default and must be engaged with as part of a reflective process that is often only ascribed to a queer experience, player, or character. In *Our Life*, you cannot stumble into a heteronormative default. Queerness is thus not purely representational, but experiential and embedded in the narrative play of the visual novel.

A Space for Touching and Feeling

Teddy Pozo (2018), discussing the 2012-2013 wave of queer games by trans artists, notes that empathy play “ha[s] allowed cisgender game fans to imagine they were closer to trans lives than they truly [a]re” (par. 4). For Pozo, and the designers and artists behind the queer games avant-garde, this practice is exploitative and brings into question the ethics of diversity and empathy in play i.e., “How should games touch the user’s body?” (para. 5). This provocation does not refuse empathy but rather calls for queer games to “exceed the limitations of ‘empathy’ games [...] by contextualizing empathy within a broader repertoire of queer game design strategies focused on affect, embodiment, and tactility” (para. 7). Pozo finds a meaningful path forward in Laura U. Marks’ (2000, as cited in Pozo, 2018) haptic visuality and in exploring games as touch-based media, seeing applications in game design aesthetics that can touch the player whilst the player is touching the game. Disorienting, destabilizing interface design can refuse “the distance necessary for observation, examination, and objectification, and instead embraces closeness, texture, and indistinct, sometimes illegible, imagery” (para. 21). In this sense, the “touch” implied by haptic visuality draws the player nearer and into an embodied engagement with the interface through, for example, grainy or otherwise illegible visuals that demand the player encounter the screen closely to uncover meaning. Pozo continues:

Queer games with this haptic aesthetic provide open-ended imagery and narratives which players are invited to fill with their own experiences and interpretations, exploring their own lives and memories in conversation with a game, rather than touring the lives and struggles of others. (para. 22)

Anable (2018), in turn, presents touch as a manifestation of an affective relation:

Being touched, in the sense of being moved emotionally, signals the very real experience of something immaterial pressing itself on our emotional state and changing it, and the capacity for us to touch someone or something else in a similar way (p. 39)

Anable describes body-machine (or player-interface) entanglements that are felt “like” or “as if” something, and the affective simile is especially striking: What happens if a player is touched not as if they are like someone or something else, as in forms of exploitative empathy, but as if they are like themselves? One answer to Pozo’s question of how games should touch the player’s body, then, could be that games should touch the user’s body as their body.

Keogh (2018) further considers this through looking at the assumed default body. For Keogh, embodied literacy is only possible because a game controller is incorporated into an able-bodied experience and its design accounts for a presumed-default body, i.e., one that can encounter a controller “correctly.” Anable puts historical, literal, and affective emphasis on the screen and, ultimately, the touchscreen, seeing it as “a sensual surface that functions within a larger affective system, revealing more than it obscures” (p. 69). Desire, enacted through a game narrative, can be a way of feeling immaterial touch (to feel touched by the game) through what Anable calls “the intimate circuit of feeling” (p. 67). This circuit is made possible by engagement with the interface. Whether a visual novel is played on a touchscreen, mobile device, computer, or console, the game directs the player to actively click, tap, or press their way through dialogue boxes. The cursor on a computer screen, of course, functions as an extension of the hand, but I propose that this intimate circle of feeling creates an extended, virtual felt space where a player can touch and be touched. In a visual novel, this felt space is a space that the player’s body can occupy because of the relatively “simple” embodied literacy demanded by basic visual novel play: Reading, clicking, and making decisions. Such forms of play are not understood as reductive by players of the genre, and can instead be an exciting draw, building a sense of involvement in the game world through clear actions (Kretzschmar and Raffel, 2023; Walker Rettberg, 2003).

This sense of “as if” touching can almost feel skin-on-skin. Anable, encountering touchscreens through the works of Silvan Tomkins, describes a hand-to-screen encounter: “The interface is where *it’s* at, if by *it* we mean the everyday intimate encounter where code, images, and subjectivity collide in ordinary but important wars” (p. 62). Anable positions the screen as Tomkins (1963, cited in Anable 2018) positions the face: “[A]s a sensing and sensible surface across which affect flows outward and inward with equal significance” (Anable, 2018, p. 61), and in vital relationship with the hands that can provoke this outward flow. Anable additionally describes the screen as one of Sara Ahmed’s zones of contact (2004, cited in Anable, 2018, p. 38) where “it”—this intimate

encounter with the interface—can happen, through a collision of concepts, feelings, and senses, leaving experiential marks on the surface of the screen and on the subject interacting with it. Affective touch, in this sense, is both physically felt and affectively felt.

While Anable's attention is grounded in the touchscreen, I argue that this touching occurs on several planes of reality and can be meaningfully manifested across different screens. To illustrate this, I turn to Rob Shields (2003) to distinguish between "virtual" as a way of describing digital technologies and technological worlds, and "virtual" as a signifier of something but not concrete. Shields' investigation of virtuality complicates what is meant by "real." He presents an alternate definition of the virtual not by debating its reality, but through consideration of the relationship between the virtual and the concrete: The abstract and the probable. The virtual and the concrete are both real; that is, they both exist. The concrete, however, is tangible and actual, while the virtual is intangible and ideal. The virtual can include memories—real but abstract, simultaneously existing and not-existing. Shields explains that the "virtual is always real, even if it is a memory or a past event, but it is not actualized in the present except via specific human interventions [...] which make these memories or other 'virtualities' tangible, concrete" (p. 39). Shields offers a complicated and multifold definition of virtuality set in relation to the concrete, where concepts can be defined on a relational field that functions less as a linear spectrum and more as a conceptually fluid space. This is a zone where that "it" described above can happen, where the collision of things leads to a sense/sensation of things. This expands on Keogh's body-game assemblage and Anable's intimate circuit by prioritizing what occurs within the circuit, rather than the circuit or assemblage itself. That is, in the affective "felt" space between player and interface. From this, I argue that visual novels can offer a compelling roleplaying experience for most players by inviting them into the game world and investing them in the narrative and its outcomes—by prioritizing, again, what occurs within the circuit.

As one way into this felt space, modern roleplaying games have players design and interpret their own player character, sometimes with customizable details as specific the colour of the character's irises and the sound of their voice. The player character is in turn represented on-screen as a virtual body navigating a virtual space, where their emotions and experiences are felt, translated from audio-visual and haptic feedback into player response. In contrast, visual novels, though they may deploy a character creator, rarely show a self-made self-representation on the screen; that is, a visual character representation through which to navigate a game world. Most often, the player character is instead narratively referenced. When a player character, or main character/MC in visual novel vernacular, is graphically represented, this representation is often limited to a small portrait rather than the full-sized sprites that prioritize the player's engagement with the NPCs. An NPC will typically take up most of the screen space in a visual novel,

set against a static background. The player must deliberately look to the player character portrait to referentially respond according to their character's expression, where available. Otherwise, a player/their character's response is felt as a combination of direction from the on-screen narration telling the player how they might feel ("you are happy") and the actual, immediate response the player has (a feeling of pleasant warmth the player might understand as happiness).

Visual novels offer a spatial relationality between three things: The concrete body of the player, positioned in front of the screen; the virtual player character body represented or implied by the game text; and an expanded, virtualized playing body, occupying the virtual space between interface and player, where the game's interventions are felt and responded to. This skin-on-skin-like encounter—where it feels as if a player is touched and touching—facilitates the committed emotional engagement in a successful romantic visual novel encounter, despite the apparent simplicity of the visual novel format. After all, as Kretzschmer and Raffel (2023) note, visual novels typically encourage repeated and eager replay sessions. As Astrid Ensslin (2012) expands regarding the significance of video game replayability: "[T]his cyclicity is not impeded by either winning or losing, or doing better or worse than before, because the challenges remain the same and have to be mastered (repeatedly) by both novice and experienced players" (p. 48). In turn, Sara Shamdani (2020) identifies cyclical game encounters as facilitating "absorption" of the player within the game, which contributes to "re-alignment of the boundaries of the body as it merges with other bodies, namely that of the [player character], and is re-formulated into something new and temporary" (p. 39). The result is that a player is never really responding fully as themselves and often acts with more than immediate awareness and knowledge.

This is not to say that a role playing player's subjectivity is somehow more pronounced or practically effective in games that allow them to create a player character than in other forms of play, only that it is the player's body—one's own body—that is experiencing the actions described on screen (Gregersen and Grodal, 2009, p. 66). Play is experienced directly, immediately, and subjectively. In visual novels, narration emphasizes this by activating specificity, extended sensory and emotional description, and diverse narrative points of view. Second-person narration, as we will see in *Our Life*, can be especially effective here, directing the player and their body through specific and detailed responses. That is, narrative point of view can be an effective way to enunciate the player's position in relation to the game. The player's body is immediately and continuously positioned in relation to the interface, rather than having the player's experience translated or empathetically understood via another, virtual body's experience. The result is a fundamental reorientation of a gaming experience. The felt space between player and visual novel becomes an explorative, affective, and bodily playing space. It allows the player to navigate their

playing as rediscovered in the playing body. A queer visual novel recognizes this potential by explicitly reorienting the player's experience of their own body and subjectivity in relation to the game.

Reorienting Gender

In this section I turn to Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) to explore the disruptive, disorienting, and queer possibilities that can occur in the felt space between player and visual novel. I propose a reorientation of a player's experience of their gender as a critical and self-reflective, rather than passive and assumed, embodied experience which stands in stark contrast to the heteronormative defaults that remain the norm in games and game culture.

Ahmed proposes disruptions of relations within space, where space involves not only viewing objects in space, but also investigating the forced inheritances that can define what occupies the space around us. Moreover, spaces can extend into bodies, just as bodies can extend into the spaces they occupy or seek to occupy. Such an understanding of space/body relations has a particular application to gender, sex, and sexuality/sexual orientation, which are shaped and policed by the straightening spaces queer bodies occupy "often through force, such that any nonalignment produces a queer effect" (p. 83). Exposing this force—that is, looking at the forcing—makes it clear that a default is not definitive and true. A default is itself a didactic fantasy, including default assumptions that push queer bodies and experiences out of community spaces and game worlds. It follows that queer effects of misalignment with a forceful and fantastical norm produce a direct and disruptive reorientation. Desire can result in (re)orientation, as can self-reflection and -exploration. These can prompt the subject to become manifestly aware of the matter of their own body, desire, and, importantly here, gender. Bringing attention to the body in space, and the forces acting on that body, can itself create a nonalignment, producing queer effects. This raises the question, then, of what a reorientation of gender in a visual novel could like and how disorientation itself might be queerly embodying.

It is increasingly common now for an otome or amare visual novel in English to default to a gender-neutral character—such as *Coffee Talk* (Toge Production, 2020)—or to let the player select the player character's pronouns, as I have expanded upon above. However, it is rarer to see a game foreground a gendered experience beyond presenting gender or, distinctly, pronouns, as a customization option. Some games make limited allowances in this sense, only allowing for the player to choose a character's name, which may never be used in the story, and their pronouns. Some games may only allow for one of these options. Queer play, even in LGBTQ+ games, then, can be limited or optional. For example, while *Dream Daddy* (Game Grumps, 2017) allows a player to design an explicitly transgender character, Braidon Schaufert (2018) notes that players:

Can avoid racialized and trans bodies just as easily as they can include them ... The game places the responsibility to queergame onto the player who may or may not be attuned to the task, rather than on the game itself (para. 15).

Through this, Chang's queergaming, which asks players to explicitly articulate their "investment in alternate modes" (2017, p. 15) of play and being, becomes optional and structurally secondary to implicit play. However, Schaufert goes on to highlight other ways of non-normative roleplay around sexuality, fatherhood, and masculinity that *Dream Daddy* invests in. Similarly, Wanderlust Games' ongoing *Andromeda Six* (2019) lets the player choose their pronouns and the science-fiction race of the player character, but these options change very little about the game's narrative. Players can pursue a relationship with any of the main NPCs, regardless of implied gender identity, without any clear discussion of identity, either as narrative self-reflection or in dialogue with other characters. While *Andromeda Six* offers a rare platonic/friendship route, allowing players to opt out of romantic encounters and sub-plots, the history and experiences that a player's choice of pronoun might imply are left implicit or for the realm of transformative, paratextual work, including fanfiction and fanart.

This is true of most otome and amare visual novels. Gender, and the personal experience of gender, tends to be overlooked from a subjective perspective, prioritized less than the romantic relationships simulated in a visual novel or dating sim. Pronoun selection, while meaningful, does not stand in for a defined gender expression or experience, nor do pronouns signal gender definitively. Players are not usually given the opportunity to explicitly talk about their character's gender through dialogue and are even more rarely invited to internally explore their character's experience of gender. Many players of visual novels take these explorations outside of their main play sessions, taking advantage of the affective space and narrative structures presented by the game's style and writing to create their own transformative work in fanfiction, fanart, and, sometimes, fan games. A queer visual novel can forcefully disrupt this. Bringing attention to something that is normally treated as a passive process—gender and/or sexuality, often conflated for the sake of ignoring one for the other—results in an active disruption and reorientation.

This discussion highlights the formal role of visual novel play and narrative style, and the way the genre's queer potential is found in the felt space between interface, body, and subjectivity. Drawing on Ahmed, Anable, and Shields, I have argued that disruptive, determined attention to the experiencing, playing body can be a means of refusing cisheteronormativity in visual novels, and that Chang's queergaming requires an explicit disorientation from the forceful, straightening norms of typical game and visual novel self-representation. Through this framework, I now present analysis of two scenes in *Our Life* which make

explicit demands of the player to reflect on their/their character's body and experience of gender, emphasizing the ways the game's second-person narration refuses a default experience and makes it both narratively and mechanically difficult for the player to opt out of the reflection. *Our Life* makes use of the narrative and play style of a visual novel, practicing a clear awareness of what draws a player to the genre, and what will keep them clicking, reading, and engaging. The effect of this effort is to not only provide an opportunity for queer experience beyond representation, but also queerly brings attention to questions and experiences of gender identity.

Active Reflection and Queer(ed) Embodiment in *Our Life*

Our Life tells the story of the player character and their family, the small Southern California town they live in, and their relationship with the boy across the street, Cove Holden. The narrative progresses through four life stages: Childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and adulthood. It is told in three acts, called "Steps," each of which is in turn told through a series of scenes which are optional to play and can be played in any order, called "Moments." Five of these Moments are free-to-play at each Step and five are premium downloadable content. In 2022, an epilogue was released which functions as Step 4, but this is told in a linear storyline rather than selectable Moments. Each Step is bookended by one scene depicting the beginning and one the end of summer, and each Moment has lines that reflect earlier choices. This results in a nesting doll of nostalgic and emotional scenes that can be longer or shorter depending on player choice and engagement. These scenes involve a level of in-game, text-based customization that makes repetitive replays unusually difficult for a visual novel; that is, it is hard to play *Our Life* in the same way twice in a row. Although the game does not have branching endings in the same sense as other visual novels, where the ending events change depending on player choice, *Our Life* finds its "branches" in a narrative structure that works more like a braid. Choices overlap, tie into each other, and refer to one another as the linear storyline progresses. It highlights the feeling of nostalgia, of growing up, over the achievement of different endings. The resulting personal experience encourages regular replays for the sake of that experience rather than the collection of different storylines.

Our Life is unique in its narration and form of customizability. Throughout the game, the player is asked to reflect on the player character's emotional state, their preferences, and their experiences from moment to moment. While the answers to questions like "how fast do you run" or "how do you feel about being adopted" do not change the outcome of the game, they make the experience eminently personal. The game remembers seemingly innocuous choices. Choosing a keychain at the beach in Step 1, for example, makes that keychain available as a phone charm in Step 3. Additionally, the game will often ask the player if they still feel the same about something as they did in

a previous scene. In later scenes, and as the player character ages from age eight to twenty-three, they can feel completely differently about a memory than they did at the time of the event. The game uses its summertime nostalgia to construct something of a personal and queer utopia. While outside events are referenced—for example, the player character’s mothers in one transition scene begin wearing their wedding rings when marriage equality passes in the United States—the player themselves never directly experiences racism, sexism, homophobia, or transphobia. However, rather than erasing difficulty, *Our Life’s* environment and story of growing up instead makes deliberate space for reflection and for conflict and resolution between its characters. In fact, the game is officially described as “feel-better” as well as “feel-good” and space is deliberately made for negative emotions and their resolution, alongside self-discovery and exploration. Its second-person narration sometimes seems to directly call on the player and never lets questions of bodily experience and identity fall to the narrative wayside.

In two scenes the player is explicitly asked to reflect on the player-character’s experience of their gender and sexuality as distinct, rather than conflated, concepts. The player character’s pronouns and name can change between Steps, and the internal dialogue will reflect this and have other characters respond. These reflective scenes come at ages thirteen and eighteen, and the latter will remind the player of their answers to the explorative questions of the former. This is the most important part of these scenes: The game asks the player, rather than assuming answers. While the player can design a player character who is cisgender, allosexual, and heterosexual, the game presents a spectrum of options and experiences that are not necessarily shared with any other character and have no tangible effect on the game’s narrative in the sense of bringing the player toward a good or bad ending. These questions can also not be skipped; they are mandatory for the scene and begin with the options of: “At birth you were assigned female and...,” “At birth you were assigned male and...,” and “You were born intersex and...” (Figure 1). The ellipsis informs the player that this is not the end of the questions. Indeed, even with the character’s pronouns for the scene already decided, the player reflects on how they experience their gender and their body-as-gendered by deciding, for example, whether they wanted or had already started hormones and how they feel about surgery (Figure 2). Further, the scene asks the player how the character feels about dating and romance and offers a series of options.

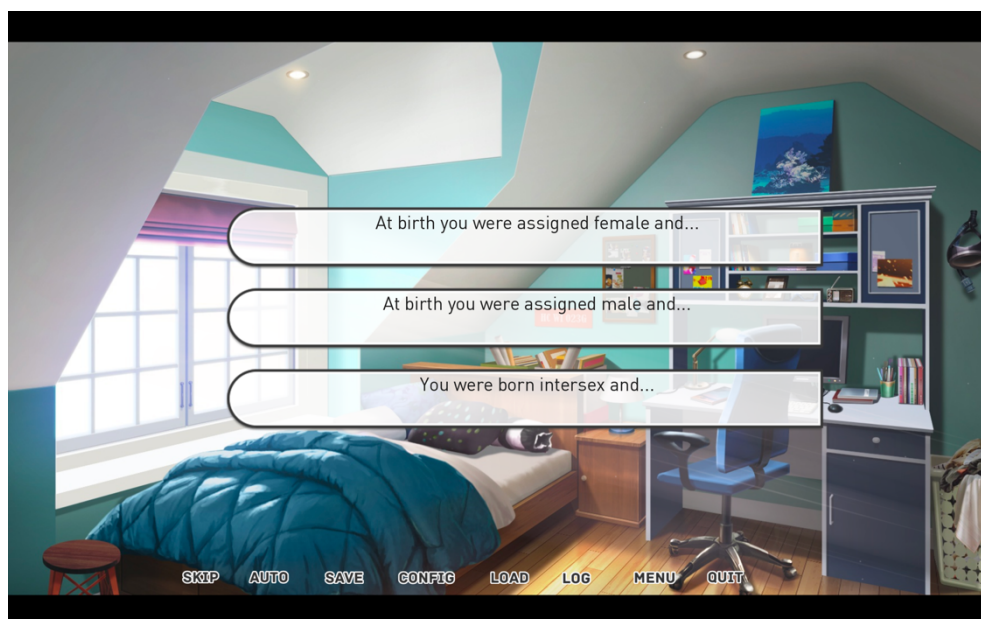


Figure 1. Our Life prompts the player to begin reflecting on their character's gender. Screenshot by author.

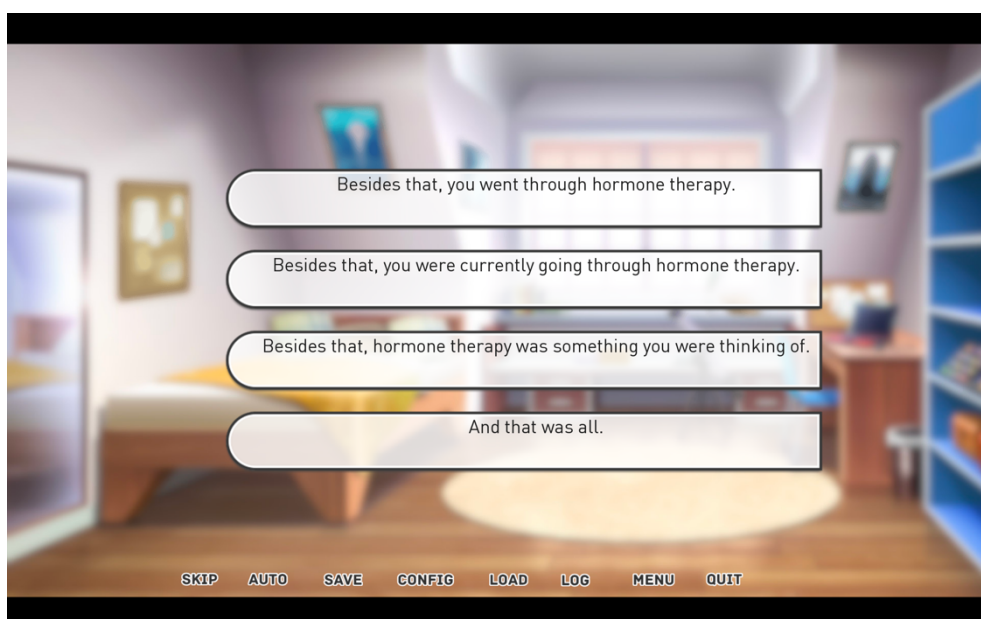


Figure 2. Our Life offers reflective decisions. Screenshot by author.

In both scenes, the choices are made through a moment of extended reflection. It ends with the player character having the option to share their thoughts with their neighbour/friend/love interest, Cove, or to keep those thoughts to themselves. Reflection is vital here: To use a car metaphor, not only is this a moment where the player is reminded that their hands are, indeed, on the steering wheel, they are given some options for how they want to drive and told that they must decide to drive in the first place. The inevitability of the scene is especially

exciting. At no point can the player skip the questions once they've started, and at no point is anything presumed default. A player cannot simply stumble into a cisheteronormative character. Instead, they must queerly reflect on the embodied experience of the character and, by extension, their own. This is one way to make use of the queer potential of a visual novel's placement of the player: A distortion of a norm/default that allows for an immediately more embodied and reflective play.



Figure 3. Our Life's doll-like character creator. Screenshot by author.

Our Life's nostalgic tone and its insistence on negative and positive emotions in its summertime utopia also enhances a sense of experience and explorative reexperience. One central presumption is that the player is not eight years old and can instead remember what it was like to be that age and perhaps later ages in the game—thirteen, eighteen or, for some, twenty-three. This virtual realization of a past that is both real, (i.e., the player's actual experience of being eight) and imagined (i.e., the player character's experience of being eight) contributes to a player's awareness of the space between their concrete body and the virtual body of the player character. The player character is shown only in a transition scene where the player designs a deliberately unrealistic doll (see Figure 3) to represent the character's basic features i.e., hairstyle and colour, glasses, freckles, skin colour, etcetera, and clothing preferences, offers checkboxes to signify whether they wear pants, skirts, or dresses.

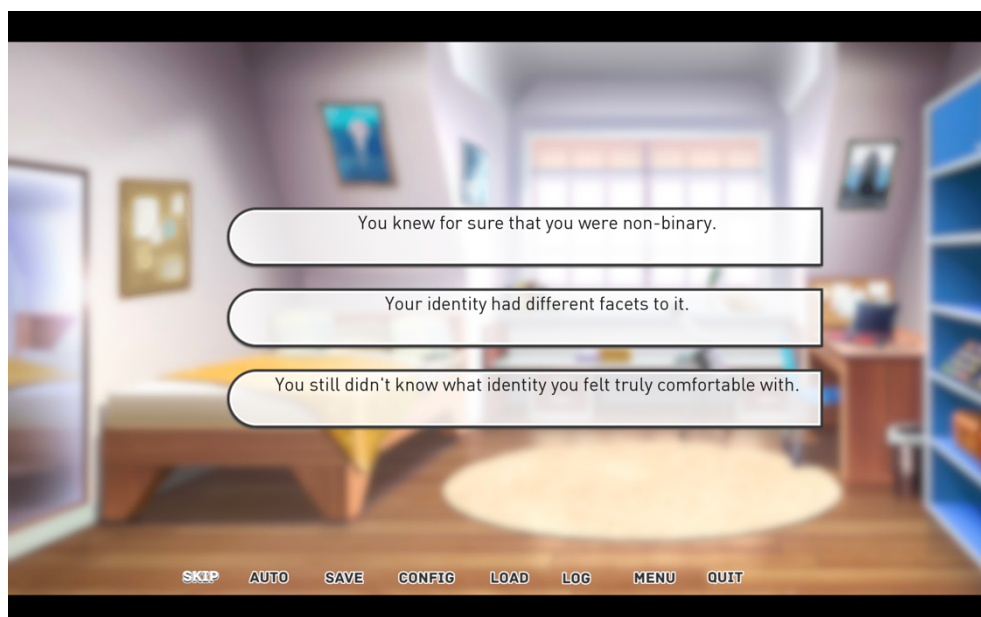


Figure 4. *Our Life* prompts reflection, leaving space for uncertainty and a sense of a possible future. Screenshot by author.

While the player character is asked to confront some of the difficult rites of passage of growing up, the game environment creates an extended space where the player and player character can explore identity through their relationship to themselves and their body (Figure 4). Indeed, the player is explicitly asked to explore identity, and that self-reflection is a necessary part of *Our Life's* gameplay. If there is a skill to be developed in this visual novel, it is self-study. Hanna Brady's "Building a Queer Mythology" (2017) reminds its reader that the "dominant and common variants aren't bad stories but their overwhelming signal strength homogenizes our frame for the world and lies to us by saying there is a right story instead of infinite stories" (p. 65). *Our Life's* reflective, deliberate play refuses that "overwhelming signal strength," Ahmed's straightening lines and forces, and instead reaches through the felt space between player and interface to draw both together in the service of infinite stories, as its closing messages suggest (Figure 5).



Figure 5. *Our Life's* closing screens invite the player to begin another "life." Screenshots by author.

Our Life's simultaneous appeal to the genre-typical urge to replay the game and its subjective complexity that makes true replayability somewhat difficult to attain, allows the player to follow the linear trajectory of its narrative to its mostly unchanging end with a level of personalization and response that allows for creative and individual playthroughs, if not the multiple endings typical of visual novels. This is made possible by the many moments that ask the player to reflect on who they are or who their character is. It has the player revisit the doll-like character creator at each step, as if reminding the player that they and their character are growing and changing as the virtual years go by. Underneath the peaceful nostalgia of it all is unflinching attention to the

youthful anxieties that come with growing up. It sets questions of gender and gendered experience, and attention to the virtually unseen but still felt and acknowledged body, alongside sub-plots about growing up, deciding one's future, identity issues that come with being adopted or growing within a blended family, having a first job, and so on. Central to all this and underpinning a narrative that can sometimes feel anxious even in its summertime utopia, is an awareness and a regular reminder that people—children, adults, parents, siblings, and friends—are capable of and undergoing constant change. Indeed, change is vital to every sub-plot, and reflective questions from the narrative ask the player to find gaps in their character's experience that will further let the game explore change and its questions. Further, *Our Life* offers up gentle prompts before the player reaches these reflective decisions, asking the player to reflect on how they feel and making use of the second-person to remind the player of what the character would know and feel in the game world and scenario, emphasizing the building of a queer utopia in the game world (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. *Our Life* emphasizes the game world through gentle prompts. Screenshot by author.

Conclusion

Through an examination of ways visual novels position the player in concrete and virtual space, I have proposed that the genre's queer potential lies in its capacity to directly impact the player, the playing body, and the virtualized felt body as is made possible by the relationality between them. *Our Life* is an example of a successful queer visual novel that directly dis- and re-orient the player's relationship to both their and their player character's gender through active and deliberate self-reflection. Play's insistence on refusing a heteronormative default in *Our Life* makes it excitingly queer, where even

cisheteronormative characterizations must be deliberately and reflectively enunciated by the player.

While this is a unique experience in visual novels, and even in queer visual novels, *Our Life's* success and popularity has recently led to a successful crowdfunding campaign for a sequel, set in Fall rather than Summer, and with the possibility of enhanced customization beyond the aesthetics usually available in player character creation for these games. GB Patch's engagement with the *Our Life* playing community sparks conversation and highlights the value felt from this particular form of subjective play. While the game's narrative is written in the second-person, it allows for a first-person experience that not only teaches the player to listen, as Kretzschmar and Raffel argue that visual novels formally do, but suggests to the player that the played, felt space I have identified is somewhere to be heard in as well—if only by the player's self.

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