

# A Body Without End: The Trans Twine Games of Porpentine Charity Heartscape

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This extended abstract outlines a textual (Mäyrä, 2008) and audio-visual-haptic (Keogh, 2018) analysis of speculative body horror in trans-authored twine games, using the award-winning but under-researched corpus of Porpentine Charity Heartscape as central case study. Focused analysis of work by and for trans audiences in depth will contribute to the emerging field of Trans Game Studies and its initial summary and typological approaches (Ruberg, 2022), and to directions in the study of Twine as a significant 'Minor Platform' troubling gaming's margins (Nicoll, 2021). Games such as *With those we Love Alive* (2014) and *Vesp: A History of Sapphic Scaphism* (2016) confront players with experimental weird interactive fiction where choice is as much about perspective as the redirection of plot; text dissolves into abstract eroticised punctuation; and narratives loop around quotidian rituals in strange dystopias. I argue that uniting Porpentine's formal experiments is an interest in darkly problematising the division of a body from the world around it through the trans re-appropriation of body horror: "There is a dist...ance between my skin and my skull [...] I perform this skin drag" (*Orifice Clique*, 2015); "...under the onslaught of this almost billowing, vividly suffused skin [...] Putting the mask on feels like attaching a healthy and proper face to a gaping hole." (*Vesp: A History of Sapphic Scaphism*, 2016). From surreal neon-lined quests under hormone withdrawal, to genre-blending narratives of selling memories for care or crafting reality-bending weaponry for love, her games evoke transition's powerful strangeness (Lavery, 2022); even viscerally exploiting the player-body's extension before and behind the screen (Keogh, 2018) with instructions to draw on our own flesh in rituals marking time and transformation.

Rather than framing trans experience as palatable to cis/straight audiences as in the appropriation of many trans developers' work as 'empathy games' (Pozo, 2018), Porpentine generates new terms dedicated to an engaged community that "prioritise[s] a nonrehabilitated form of bad affect" (Lax, 2021:2) against its elision or sublimation. As *Parasite's* (2014) protagonist reflects, with textual redactions throughout destabilising its reading: "it wasn't until years later that id figure out what i could be, t at [*sic*] i would gain words to clad my nakedness". This opposes assimilation and trans(homo)nationalist (Pruar, 2015:46) extension of subjectivity to

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a privileged few as we find in the white, cis-passing, tokenistic inclusion of trans characters in mainstream franchises (*Apex Legends*, 2019- *Rainbow Six: Siege*, 2015-). Instead Porpentine frames transition as ongoing carnal processes invoking Susan Stryker's embrace of Frankenstein as a radical trans subjectivity mobilising monstrous power beyond the natural order (1994).

Porpentine's work emblematises Twine's capacity to "destabilize [gaming culture's] normative structures of feeling" (Nicoll, 2020:158), where Twine itself is arguably a "queer platform" that plays with "monstrosity and eroticism" with consequent marginalization even within academia (Salter & Moulthrop, 2021:205) which Ruberg's call for Trans Game Studies hopes to redress (2022:202). Porpentine's work aligns with radical, affective Twine and craft-based works addressing the activist spectrum of queer utopian mobilisation of possibility and queer negativity's rejection of normative aspirations (Muñoz, 2009) such as *Only Queers in Love at the End of World* (Anthropy, 2013) and *Ritual of the Moon* (Stone, 2019). In Porpentine's worlds of eroticized networks in shattered cities, hermetically sealed bodies enduring wasp plagues, and industrialised undead nations, she creates dark speculative playgrounds for expanding understandings of bodily monstrosity, sensuality and temporality. At the micro level the body is suspended in the uncertainty of radical "mechanics of speculation" (Kunzelman, 2022) owing to the ineffable possibility spaces behind hypertext prompts which might cycle emotional attitudes, change unpredictable inventories, reveal novel descriptions of fantastical sense-perceptions, or play with the possibility of change by employing looping hyperlinks.

As 'operator' of the cybertext (Aarseth, 1997) we do more than navigate, and as the trans poet and academic Micha Cárdenas argues of algorithms, the operator changes the affective relations of variables (2021). Here we re-orient our bodies by re-writing our character's desires and feeling the resistance of texts that tease the erotic and thanatic. As 'reparative games', these dystopias articulate "the slow, steady work of resilient survival and utopian dreaming" (Stone, 2018:11), and, like Stone, Porpentine is interested in the quotidian, with surreal everyday rituals in hypertext loops: repeating nightmares, pharmaceutical chores, or endlessly heaping skulls into a pit in *Skulljhabit's* (2014) critique of capitalist labour. Here trans bodies engage with looping reparative play, but also queer failure (Halberstam, 2011) and even dark play (Linderoth & Mortensen, 2015) with suicidal ideation. While Stone (2018) includes trans lived experience in their intersectional model and speaks to healing as an always unfinished process, trans existence involves radical 'decreation' to preserve life (Lau, 2018) as well as aspirations towards future unknowable bodies rather than repair. For Porpentine this involves "embrac[ing] the endless process of change" (Hayward, 2012) rather than affective restoration/maintenance, where uncanny labour remains unresolved and desire remains fluid in an entanglement of body and process. Porpentine pushes long textual loops of stabbing, hacking and heaping through body horror's lens to a Frankensteinian framing of open wounds as new points of attachment and extension--as the autofictional *Orifice Clique* has it: "I am an energy radiating from a brokenness" (2015).

Interactive text allows players to take the position of both reader and writer (Montfort, 2011:1), but here this relation is pushed through formal experimentation akin to what Peterson sees in trans poetry as a "testing [of] the limits of habitability in poems" (2022). As a trans player I experience that position as a reading-writing of the body, unfinished and recomposed through that intense dialectical interaction between world and flesh: its constitution changes through body horror narratives and

its identity shifts from the semi-autobiographical to the fantastical; its performativity expands and contracts through looping time; and its affects oscillate with scattered use of procedurally generated dystopian prose. Body and text are written together in an embodiment of Cárdenas' trans poetics of algorithmic assemblage (2021), when we are asked by *With Those...* to "Draw a sigil of new beginnings on your skin", encoding the body into the game and the game into the body. 'Text' and 'system' are both problematised in relation to the body by Cárdenas who reads textual poetics as the meeting of matter and agency and systems as poetic algorithms of mobile and interacting identities (2021). As trans poetic art, Porpentine's works are assemblages of temporalities, affects and bodies that use horror as a means of probing transformation and extension where I "do not know where the system of my body ends or begins" (*Vesp*).

The trans player is here both textually and mechanically afforded a corporeal poetics through which we may find catharsis, empowerment and new understandings of the body's darkly ecstatic extension and transmutation through play. Bodies without end.

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