Making and Playing for Catharsis

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the cathartic affordances of game-making and game-playing through *Like mother, like burr*, a series of autofictional game sketches that reconstruct my mother–daughter relationship as a first-generation Chinese immigrant. Building on Reparative Game Design, I operationalize its tenets—repair, care, and share—into a cyclical methodology of self-writing, iterative making, self-play, and theoretical reflection. Through a close analysis of the sketch "I (have) memorized these streets," I show how bilingual dissonance, fragmented memory, and personal archival materials become procedural forms that re-story lived experience. Using aesthetic catharsis as an evaluative lens, I trace how game mechanics enact the untranslatability of immigrant identity and produce affective intelligibility for the maker-player. The paper contributes a transferable reparative approach centered on positioning, materiality, cycling, re-storying, and catharsis, offering designers a practical model for creating deeply personal, emotionally situated games.

Keywords

Autobiographical/autofictional game, Reparative Game Design, game sketching, personal games, aesthetic catharsis, memory

INTRODUCTION

Like mother, like burr is a collection of autofictional game sketches in progress that document my mother-daughter relationship across more than two decades. These sketches arise from the need to record, reinterpret and reconcile personal memory and narrative, as a first-generation Chinese immigrant and as a daughter, to imbue them with newfound agency, to imagine alternative pasts, and as a form of self-preservation. This research attempts to answer: What are the affordances of game-making and game-playing in achieving personal catharsis?

Grounded in the objective of care in the landscape of video games, the sketches were developed within the theoretical frame of Kara Stone's Reparative Game Design (RGD), which proposes itself as an alternative to dominant game-making paradigms. Prompted by the tenets established in RGD, I position myself as the sole maker and player of the game. Research, making, and playing become processes that reciprocally inform one another in continuous feedback loops, toward artistic and personal

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reconciliation. And the sketches function as both experiment and reflection, recalling, manipulating, and replaying memory.

Through self-writing, iterative making, self-play, and theoretical reflection, the work develops a cyclical methodology in which autobiographical material can be transformed into play mechanics and aesthetics, and culminate in affective analysis. To illustrate the proposed methodology, the paper analyzes the second sketch from *Like mother, like burr*, "I (have) memorized these streets". I examine how personal archives, bilingual text, self-translation, and post-processed photos function as affective design materials. Aesthetic catharsis is used as a personal yet traceable form of affective analysis through which repair is qualitatively assessed, drawing on post-Aristotelian understandings of mimesis and recognition.

While rooted in a singular autobiographical narrative, the research argues that these practices can be enacted as a transferable approach for independent, self-expressive game-making. It reframes subjectivity not as a limitation or hindrance, but as necessary in a model through which memory, care, and confession act as material for play, and through which personal histories can be transformed into creative agency and emotional knowledge. The aim is to show how these cycles can serve as a reparative technique for game designers wishing to undertake similar personal, vulnerable, or memory driven work.

CARE IN GAME

Care is a mode of engagement; care is a tool; care is a politic; care is an affect; care can evoke an action. Care has also long been representationally and methodologically absent in the landscape of video games. With the onset of game-makers that aim to shift the core of gaming from conflict to care, a new mode of playing has been created that challenges the old hegemony of play. As game-makers like Brie Code have foregrounded the genre with games like #SelfCare, in which the player takes care of "oneself," such games are correlated with the neoliberalization of care, in which the caring of one's well-being moves away from being a responsibility of the state to the individual. Such games exemplify the initial key tension between care and video games – whether creating and playing games of care have true merit and can be represented as a "radical or hegemonic act" (Ruberg and Scully-Blaker, 2021).

In the broader feminist framework, care has also been characterized as an opposition to exiting, "a cultural fantasy brought by the pain of capitalism," as proposed by Sarah Sharma, and the more nuanced concept of the "feminist complaint," as proposed by Sara Ahmed, in which "leaving can be staying, with feminism." And thus, video games, by providing temporary shelter from socially dominant logics and systems, can create and regenerate the energy necessary to purely maintain and be. Video games can and should be thought of "technologies of care," and the issues of care in video games are critical to assess "what or who this new technology will take care of" (Ruberg and Scully-Blaker, 2021).

Games built to care are often categorized as empathy games, made by marginalized people "designed to foster a sense of identification and meaningful understanding in straight, cisgender (and white) players" (Ruberg and Scully-Blaker, 2021). Aubrey Anable describes these games as affective systems, as they try to convey the subjective experiences of living with certain disorders, and the most critical objective remains making players care. The nature of these affective systems calls to question the

ambivalence that lies not only in video games' capacity to evoke care, but whether it is a responsibility. Empathy games become largely problematic when they, then, become enterprises in which they re-marginalize and re-traumatize the community that they had claimed to care about. Empathy becomes a double-pronged sword as they “take the transgressive feelings of marginalized people... and make them safe and 'good' by repackaging them as briefly challenging but ultimately uplifting experiences that privileged players can relate to,” as Ruberg critiques (2020). However, just as care houses these dilemmas, it is also critical. Care and its ambivalence are “precisely one of its values as a meaningful framework for thinking about the radical potential and cultural value of video games” (Ruberg and Scully-Blaker, 2021).

And in contending with these convolutions of care, the framework that I propose, built on Reparative Game Design, is solely grounded in the individual maker-player experience that doesn't encourage sanitization in game-making and game-playing for the secondary player, but rather, to place care in releasing the things deemed too private, too ugly, too indulgent, too traumatic to be overcome by the collective “me”s. Game-making and game-playing can be uncomfortable and self-serving, they need not be didactic, they are merely another means of survival. As Ruberg and Scully-Blaker poignantly conclude, “care is hard (both difficult and unmovable), but, for this reason, it is also tenacious” (2021).

Reparative Game Design

Reparative Game Design (RGD), coined by game scholar and artist Kara Stone is a “process of creating interactive media focused on healing, emotional acceptance, and accessibility for the psychosocially disabled,” a practice that celebrates gaps, doubts, and multiplicity (Stone, 2023). It emerges as an alleviation from and in opposition to the exploitative norms of mainstream game culture, and foregrounds vulnerability and affect as integral components of game-making. RGD represents a paradigm shift away from productivity-driven, crunch-oriented practices toward an anti-debilitative approach, one that cares for the game-making and the game-maker. Though the term psychosocially disabled is emphatically placed in Stone’s own ideology, I want to note that despite my strong aligning with its definition and usage in RGD, I am not well-equipped to address this aspect of it in my own work.

Stone positions RGD through three tenets: repair, care, and share.

Repair does not promise for cure or an eradication of malaise, but, rather, it strives “to make work that may one day change the media landscape,” work that makes “life more livable” (Stone, 2023).

Care lives in the recognition of labor - the labor of the maker, the labor of the player, the labor of life, the labor of time - and to prioritize the well-being of all parties. And it asks for conscious self-reflection in game, discerning that “affect cannot be quantified” (Stone, 2023).

Sharing calls for radical openness and consideration, conceding that making is “coming to understanding,” instead of “demonstrating understanding,” and that, most crucially, meaning extends far beyond playtime (Stone, 2023).

In this research, RGD functions as both a conceptual framework and working methodology. As a framework, it establishes vulnerability, uncertainty, and affect as

necessary and welcoming factors to encounter. As a methodology, it is enacted through four modes of practice: iterative making, self-writing, self-play, and theoretical reflection, culminating in affective analysis. It is through this operationalization that RGD becomes a reproducible method rather than a sole conceptual approach. The model proposed in this paper emerges directly through this methodological expansion of RGD, and positions both game-making and game-playing as inquiry.

THE GAME SKETCHES

Defined by Emma Westecott as a rapid generative mode of development that produces "playthings" and sustains a feedback loop between maker, practice, and game engine (2020). Game sketching enabled ideas to be materialized swiftly and responsively due to their close likeness to the practice of drawing, "used as metaphor," one in which the drawer communicates with their idea through drawing and repeats (2020). In my work, game sketching synthesizes everything I've learnt about, written about, and pontificated about into artifacts that can be tested, altered, played and replayed.

Game sketching, as practiced here, is inseparable from research-creation. Research, making, and playing continually inform one another. These are not linear loops, they overlap, contradict, and repeat. Sketches are not merely outputs but processes, they are moving, malleable sites of inquiry and reparative rehearsals. These characteristics make game sketching suitable for developing a methodological model grounded in the principles of RGD.

The four initial sketches of *Like mother, like burr* map the mother-daughter relationship across the first eighteen years of my life: "The piano," "I (have) memorized these streets," "My conversation with my mum over the phone in which I try to tell her about *Rent* the musical to varying degrees of success," and "Anthems for an eighteen year old girl who'd much rather." Each sketch functions as affectual experiment and reflection, testing how game mechanics, aesthetics and memory re-enactment can evoke emotion in self-play. Instead of striving for completeness and player-facing coherence, the sketches are iterative vessels through which fragments of memory and narrative are reconstructed, manipulated, or troubled.

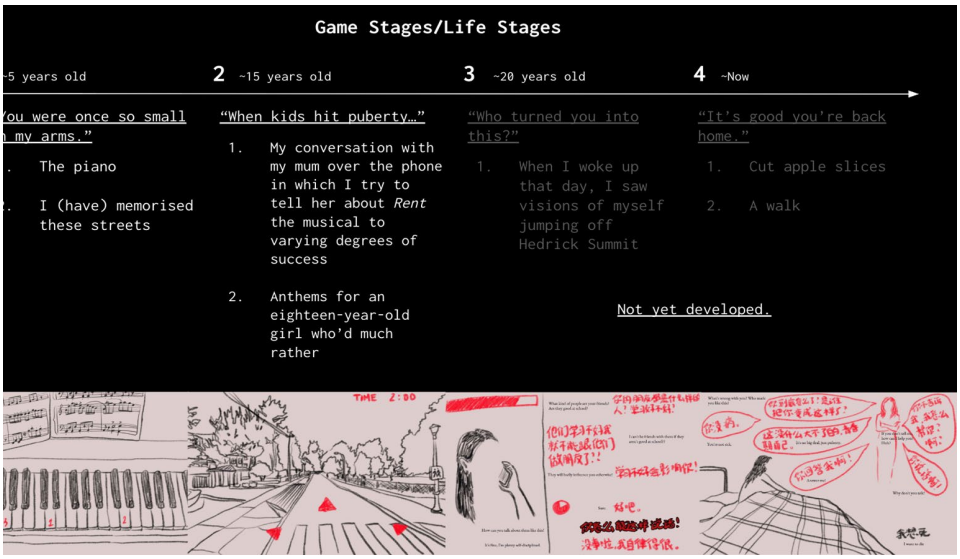

Figure 1: Planned game stages of L*ike mother, like burr* as they correspond to real life stages

As of now, the four sketches (of the planned seven) are finished and below are brief descriptions of each.

1. “The piano”

I am 5 years old.

The greatest bane of my existence is this regal piano that stands before me.

This is a procedural sequence that emulates the monotony of my practicing piano. When I stop playing, an argument ensues between my mum and I, signaled by the ominous footsteps leading upstairs and the heavily distorted text on screen. This is an argument with her that I had for the very first time then, but versions of it had invariably found themselves into our conversations many times since then. The incisive conclusion from my mum is always the same, that I am unable to keep nay promises to myself and to her, that I will always 半途而废, or “fall by the wayside”.

2. “I (have) memorized these streets”

I *am 8 years old.*

I've just immigrated to Vancouver with my mum.

This is a searching sequence, simulating my walk home from school and through the streets of Richmond, Vancouver as I had done countless times throughout the ages of eight to twelve. I am searching for my mum, at places that I now recall as having made up much of my childhood. This is an accumulation of everything I'd felt, as it was the beginning of the immigrant life for my mum and I. She was always away, and I was always waiting – at home, in the car, on the reception couch. In my reimagination, I can finally look for her.

3. “My conversation with my mum over the phone in which I try to tell her about *Rent* the musical with varying degrees of success”

I am 15 years old.

I am in a city away from her going to school.

This is a text-based sequence, a recall and a simulation of an actual conversation over the phone with her in which my announcement of my involvement in a school production of *Rent* turns into an unseemly argument. It divulged that there are certain truths that could never be shared between us, certain conversations never to be had. It was a turning in my relationship with her, that we may always carry irreconcilable views.

4. “Anthems for an eighteen year old girl who'd much rather”

I am 18 years old.

It's senior year, a bit before my graduation, and mum has come to visit.

This is another text-based sequence, a reproduction of a conversation. I recreate the passivity that I had felt, of having wanted to say everything but for nothing to come out. I was on my bed, and my mum was standing at the furthest point away from me in the room, her arms crossed. She asks me questions then answers them. She attempts words of comfort then undercuts them. My words and thoughts disappear as quickly as they appear. I do not speak up until these words appear, and they grow until they fill the room. Once spoken, something breaks.

FOUR PRACTICES

The methodology of this research, though rooted in RGD, becomes actionable through four modes of practice that structure my game design process: self-writing, iterative making, self-play, and theoretical reflection. These modes are neither linear nor sequential, they are practiced in recursive cycles in which research, making, and playing become continually, deliberately entangled.

Self-writing

Self-writing includes ruminarratives, collection of autoethnographic material, and autoethnographic documentation. Ruminarratives are described by Donna Henson as a narrative form of rumination, they are "repetitive, recursive, introspective utterances that tumble and trouble and trace the secret shape of some secret me" (2017). They allow for the designer to articulate emotional textures and personal histories that may resist conventional narrative structure. Autoethnographic material, such as a personal archive of media, and autoethnographic notes, such as descriptions of places, sensory impressions and memory fragments, function as affective data that then feed directly into design decisions.

Iterative making

Iterative making is practiced through game sketching, which privileges open experimentation, through which intuitive game design choices can be enacted as playable mechanics. Decisions at this stage, whether visual, mechanical, sonic, or textual, are provisional and are treated as initial sites of open and necessary inquiry.

Self-play

Self-play positions the designer as the primary player. This mode foregrounds the maker-player duality central to reparative practice: the same person who constructs the system experiences it, and is, thus, the most important, if not sole, audience to consider in the game design process. Self-play surfaces frictions, affective responses, and emergent questions that are not always visible during making. These may include confusion, discomfort, or emotional resonance. Self-play becomes a diagnostic tool for understanding how mechanics, aesthetics, and structure are communicating affective states.

Theoretical reflection

Theoretical reflection involves situating instinctive design choices within broader conceptual frameworks. The purpose of this reflection is not to impose theory onto

the work, but to reveal how the work is already in conversation with these frameworks. Lucidity gained during this mode informs subsequent revisions of the sketch and is also crucial in affective analysis.

Cyclical process

These four modes operate as a methodological cycle:

Self-writing → iterative making → self-play → theoretical reflections → revisions → repeat

The cycle enables the designer to return repeatedly to the same emotional material, each time with newfound insights, mechanics, and modes of understanding. It is through these repeated cycles that RGD becomes a method, a way of working in which emotional complexity, uncertainty, and vulnerability are not obstacles to the game design process but generative forces within it. It is a revelatory way of working that informs past, present and future decisions, affording catharsis in the process as well.

CASE STUDY: I (HAVE) MEMORIZED THESE STREETS

"I (have) memorized these streets" is the second sketch in *Like mother, like burr*, set in the early days of the immigrant life for my mum and I, and I am eight years old in the sketch. It simulates my walk from school, one that I had repeated endlessly as a young child. I now search for my mum at the grocery store, at the library, at the mall, at the bank… She was always away, and I was always waiting, at home, in the car, on the reception couch. And in this reenactment of what used to be familiar routes, I can finally look for her. The sketch runs on a loop, with "mum" only appearing at random at a single in-game site per game run. If "mum" is found, she takes "me" out to a meal. "I" am left to wander the fabricated landscape again and again, otherwise.

Making this sketch allowed me to return to a formative spatial, emotional, and linguistic terrain. The sketch functions as a site where the cycles of writing, making, playing, and reflection expose the layered residues of memory, displacement, and self-translation that shaped my early immigrant experience.

Self-Writing as Foundation

The sketch begins with self-writing through ruminarratives, generating affective fragments that move between my past and present selves, drifting between languages. These textual fragments attempted to approximate the emotional texture of the first years following immigration, and to connect and pinpoint them to specific locations. For example, the bank and the immigration bureau conjure up feelings of unease and impatience, whilst the library and the grocery store bring about elation and fondness that affect my later treatment of the images of these respective places in asset creation.

Alongside these ruminarratives, I collected autoethnographic materials. These included field notes, impressions of key childhood sites, and both old and new photographs taken during returning visits to home that formed a visual archive of my early days in Canada. These pieces became the raw material for an in-game map of sentiment that my in-game self would roam.

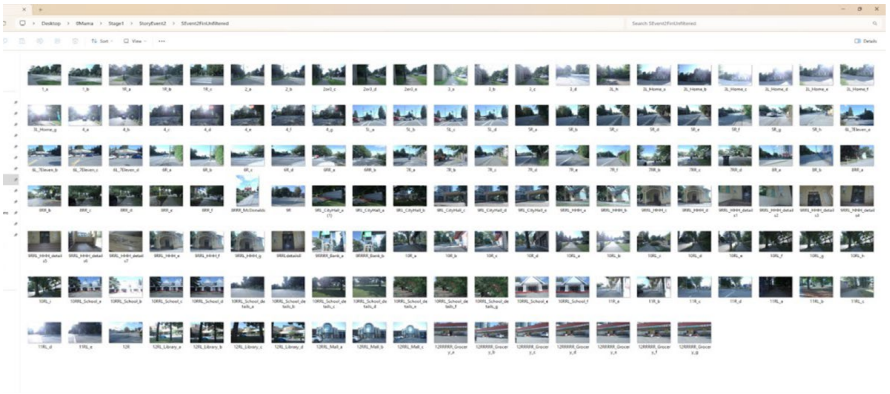

Figure 2: A screenshot of photos taken of key sites during field research

Iterative Making: Manipulating the Archive

These written and visual materials formed the foundation for the first iteration of the sketch. My first decisions regarding game mechanics were intuitive: I began to transpose images of the same site on top of each other, trying to simulate how a mind might attempt to piece together a memory from dispersed icons. I discarded pieces of an image that felt unfamiliar to me, and in their place I filled with more familiar photographic fragments, on an entirely biased basis of personal sentiment. And this resulted in some photos that were closer in likeness to their real-life counterparts, as opposed to others that appeared more foreign and estranged. I had instinctually created a spectrum of familiarity that was visually depicted through the post-processed photographs of my recalled childhood places. These altered images became the representational entities of my childhood sites in-game. As Susan Sontag notes, photographs are “inventions of memory,” and manipulating them becomes a way of possessing — or repossessing — the past, allowing me to shape my memories into a form that I can finally re-engage with (1973).

Figure 3: A post-processed photo of a key site used in-game

I then overlaid the images with text in both English and Chinese. The texts give the impression of being translations of each other, but carry dissimilar content, and one

language would often divulge more than the other. Each in-game site that "I" visit is accompanied by these texts and some of the writing echoes back to the field research I'd conducted as well.

These textual and imaged distortions became the basis for the sketch's visual landscape. This instability was not merely representational, but mechanical. This was, for me, a way to render the phenomenology of early immigrant childhood, where the world felt both familiar and inaccessible.

Self-Play: Encountering Semantic Dissonance

When I entered the sketch as a player, the mechanics further revealed tensions I had not consciously designed. The most prominent affect was what I described as "semantic dissonance." This dissonance was not solely linguistic; it was ontological. English text evoked my public self, the self formed through school, peers, and assimilation. Chinese text evoked my private self, the self formed through the mother-daughter dynamic, through obligation, and through emotional enmeshment. These selves did not align, and their dissonance was reproduced in the sketch.

These observations were the first signal that the bilingual mechanic in the sketch was not merely representational; it was affective. Incorporating bilingual text was not a matter of accessibility for the secondary player either, but a method to visualize my identity as a process of always being in translation, and they created distance between the game, myself, and the inevitable secondary player, by forcing them to choose between what to read, and to scrutinize the text to do it.

Theoretical Reflection: Translation as Becoming

To understand the emerging mechanics, I turned to theoretical frameworks that helped contextualize these affective tensions. Manuela Constantino's concept of the immigrant as "bilingual text" was particularly instructive (2008). Constantino argues that the immigrant self is continually reinterpreted across cultural and linguistic contexts, resulting in a subjectivity that is "perpetually in translation" (Constantino, 2008). This description resonated deeply with my experience in the sketch: the text was not simply bilingual, it was split.

Similarly, Simona Gallo's writing on the bilingual poet Ouyang Yu introduces further concepts of self-translation, suggesting that the act demands a "'dialogic (re)imagination' of worlds through words" (2022). Dialogism refers to the process in which meaning arises out of interaction between the maker, the work and the audience, and encapsulates my aim in utilizing bilingual mechanics. The bilingual texts are metonymic for the different selves I carry both inside the game and outside of it, such as the child immigrant self playing the memory, the adult self revisiting (and making) the memory, the Chinese-speaking self, the English-speaking self, the bilingual self who sits in the gap. The sketch has created conditions through mismatched translations and illegible text in which meaning is produced not through a stable player self, but through conflict, misalignment and polyphony between linguistic selves. It is an act of reimagination through dialogic interplay in which an original and translated self become mutually constitutive, transforming bilingual fracture into playable form.

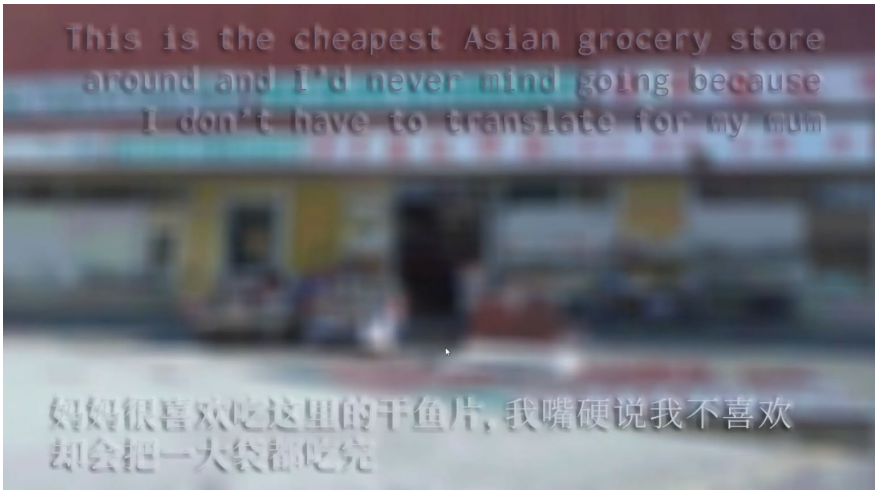

Figure 4: Mismatched self-translations overlaid on image asset of key site in-game

These frameworks helped me articulate what was emerging in the sketch: a mechanic of linguistic fracture that mirrored the emotional fracture inherent to immigrant identity.

Revision: Auditory Division

Guided by these theoretical insights, I revised the sketch to incorporate more intentional mechanics. I introduced bilingual voice-over of the written texts, one audio track in English and one in Chinese, and split them across stereo channels. English occupied the right ear; Chinese the left. When heard together, the tracks produced indiscernible noise; only when isolated, each produced meaning. This mechanic represented the difficulty of inhabiting both languages simultaneously. It was a reenactment of what I had experienced as an immigrant child: the impossibility of coherent bilingualism, the sense that understanding one language required a partial abandonment of the other.

Second Round of Self-Play: Playing Three Selves

In the second round of self-play, I entered the sketch not as a single, unified player, but deliberately as three linguistic selves: as a Chinese speaker, as an English speaker, and as a bilingual speaker. This triadic approach emerged from my recognition in the earlier iteration that the bilingual mechanics were not simply aesthetic choices but reenactments of how language had historically structured and divided my sense of self. In this round of testing, I wanted to encounter the different intersubjective and affective positions that the sketch has constructed depending on which linguistic position I chose to inhabit.

The three play modes do not simulate player types but, rather, reflect the divided linguistic consciousness that structures my memory of early immigration. As a Chinese-language player, I recognize textures of familiarity but encounter estrangement where English intrudes or contradicts the Chinese lines. As an English-language player, the Chinese appears as withheld knowledge, meaning is present but unreachable. As a bilingual player, the doubleness itself becomes the mechanic as neither language offers stable ground, and meaning must be triangulated,

approximated, or felt rather than read. I experienced the sketch as a field of shifting interpretive frames. At moments, the two languages seemed to converse, at others, they clashed. There were passages where meaning was accessible only by reading across both languages, and others where the presence of one language seemed to actively destabilize the meaning of the other. These dynamics produced what I described as a "double-consciousness of play," a layered awareness of how language, identity, and memory collided in each navigation. This creates a "Third Space," a plane of in-betweenness that is in constant change as proposed by Edward Soja (1996). In this sketch, the third space is a transtextual zone where meaning is made not through either language but across them.

The mechanics produced distinct affective conditions depending on the positionality of the player-self, underscoring the degree to which immigrant identity is mediated not only by language, but by the shifting relationality between languages. Thus, self-playing as three selves is not a method for testing accessibility, but a way of activating the sketch's intersubjective architecture. Each mode reveals a different relationship to belonging, estrangement, and linguistic sovereignty. Through these shifting interpretations, the sketch becomes a space in which I can rehearse, confront, and reconfigure the divided identities produced by immigration and bilingualism

Returning to Theory: Un/translatability of the Self

At this stage of the process, I turn to theory again, returning to Constantino and the broader discourse on immigrant self-translation. Constantino emphasizes that translation is not merely a linguistic operation but an identity operation: when one translates, one is "undergoing identity translation," becoming a text read differently by different audiences. Her description of her own experiences as a French-Canadian immigrant resonates especially: "I have become a bilingual text that they are trying to decipher with only one language… I have lost the ability to reproduce this person" (2008). This foregrounds the asymmetrical, often irreconcilable relationship between a pre-immigration "source text" self and a post-immigration "target text" self. This asymmetry helps me understand why I had constructed my in-game translations to betray one another and why certain words, meanings, or experiences were withheld or obscured in either language. The sketch was already operating as a representation of this uneven legibility.

Sherry Simon's articulation of translation as "translingual practice, a writing across languages" clarifies why my bilingual text and audio are not acts of equivalence but acts of production (2000). They produce a space in which Chinese affects English, and English distorts Chinese, making the process of translation visible. In my sketch, the oscillation between legible and illegible language performs a similar visibility: translation is not a bridge but a tension.

Through Constantino, I came to see the sketch's bilingual structures not as failures of clarity but as manifestations of the "un/translatability of the self," structures that force both the primary and secondary player to inhabit the dissonance of being perpetually read in one language while living in another. This theoretical lens reframes the sketch as a process of self-translation: an attempt to render my "source text" self into a new linguistic and cultural frame while acknowledging that translation is "never complete nor fully accurate," and that no "comfortable position" exists from which to observe difference (2008). The sketch was not only reenacting memory but also materializing

the emotional labor of translation. Translation, in this context, was not a bridge but a wound.

Final Self-Writing: Sovereignty Over My Life Texts

My final round of self-writing reframes these decisions not as dysfunction, but as a form of sovereignty, a reclamation of my life texts. I recognize that my deceptive translations, my use of alienation, and my linguistic doubling are my way of asserting control, to compensate for a long existing lack that I had felt when sandwiched between two cultures, and it is a pointedly expressed bitterness that derives from disenchantment and intellectual marginalization. As Ouyang Yu exclaims: “You may forever hover around the edge of the centre, giving the mistaken impression that you are part of the centre” (2022).

The final round of writing that emerged from this stage of the process was less about documentation and more about recognition. The illegible text, the deliberate mistranslations, and the overlapping audio tracks were not obstacles to clarity but expressions of agency. They allowed me to stage and accost the pernicious effects of linguistic inequity.

The more I wrote, the more I saw how the sketch reproduces the rupturing of the self as divided by language. This rupture is not something I have resolved; rather, it is something I have learned to inhabit. In the sketch, it becomes structured, playable, and ultimately intelligible, not because the game offers answers, but because it renders visible the internal logic of an experience that had previously remained felt rather than articulated.

I also recognized that the dissonance produced by the sketch was not merely personal. It engaged, indirectly, with larger structures of cultural assimilation and linguistic hierarchy. English, as the dominant language of the environment I immigrated into, carried institutional and social authority; Chinese, as the language of home, carried emotional authority. In the sketch, these positions are reversed, entangled, and destabilized. The sketch does not reproduce the hierarchy; it confronts it.

The Sketch as Experiment, Reflection, Reproduction, and Reckoning

Through these iterative cycles, “I (have) memorized these streets” became more than an autofictional reconstruction. It became an experiment, reflection, reproduction, and reckoning. Each iteration revealed new dimensions of the emotional and linguistic terrain I was working within. Each playthrough exposed contradictions I had not yet confronted. Each theoretical engagement provided new vocabulary for understanding these contradictions.

For the inevitable secondary player, someone who does not share the same linguistic or cultural background, the sketch may function as an encounter with disorientation, confusion, or inaccessibility. These sensations are not incidental; they are integral to the mechanic of re-storying. They offer a situated but partial glimpse into the lived experience of navigating between incompatible linguistic systems.

For me as the primary player, the sketch remains a site of recognition. It becomes an affective loop, returning me to earlier versions of myself, reframing them, and allowing

me to articulate what had previously remained unspoken. The sketch does not offer resolution, but it still serves a reparative function by being a structured, playable form through which emotional knowledge can be acknowledged.

This process of writing, making, playing, reflecting, and rewriting is the core of my reparative methodology. The sketch demonstrates how memory can be reconfigured through game mechanics, how language can be examined through play, and how personal history can be transformed into emotional knowledge. It exemplifies the model I propose: one in which personal archives, iterative processes, and affective engagement work together to produce a mode of game-making that is deeply subjective, yet methodologically transferable.

AESTHETIC CATHARSIS

Through the recalling, remaking, and replaying of one's personal histories, I've come to frame catharsis not as an endpoint but as an effect that equally emerges through cycles of practice. Aesthetic catharsis is the way I trace what the sketch has repaired, shifted, or divulged. It is a qualitative but systemic way of assessing emotional change.

I draw from the post-Aristotelian interpretation of catharsis that I cite through Eva Schaper and Alan Paskow: that catharsis is bound to the unique effect of art through "its mimetic function and ability to elicit emotion" (1968). And that the pleasure of catharsis comes from a player's grasp of their own emotional response to the events, experiencing "the transformation of events into coherent, meaningful, structured and intelligible events" (Schaper, 1968). This interpretation allows me to situate catharsis not as purification or emotional purging but as a form of intelligibility. Emotional recognition becomes the structural outcome of gameplay.

In "I (have) memorized these streets," the mimetic dimension arises from my deliberate reconstruction of the fracturing of my linguistic and cultural identity when I first immigrated. I initially could not articulate why I had obstructed bilingual text, produced mismatched English and Chinese translations, or created voice-overs in which one language occupies each ear, generating only an indecipherable mess when heard together. Only through theoretical reflection did I understand that these mechanics served a mimetic function, reproducing the fracturing of the self as divided by language and my own experience of being belittled by language.

In this sense, the sketch does not merely reference memory, it structures memory into an intelligible system through its mechanics, fulfilling Schaper's notion that aesthetic catharsis emerges when artistic form crystallizes the significance of events in life. The sketch transforms the diffuse affect of early immigrant confusion into a set of playable structures, such as obscured translations, semantic slippage, dissonant audio, that articulate what had previously been felt but not expressible.

Alan Paskow's contribution to aesthetic catharsis further illuminates what occurs in this sketch. For Paskow, catharsis arises when an audience encounters a "principal ego," the main self, and its "counter ego nucleus," the suppressed selves, all of which become momentarily available through one's identification with a character portrayed (in game) with psychological verisimilitude (1983). And through appropriation experienced through this character, one is able to gain understanding and acceptance of selves previously suppressed or undiscovered. In an autofictional game, this identification is intensified, as the in-game character and the maker-player are

“bound” by the highest degree of identification. The selves then become inseparable and indistinguishable, and are only made real when played.

In “I (have) memorized these streets,” my player-character is neither a direct self-portrait nor a completely fictional entity, but what I see as a self bearing “a complex mixture of disclosure and disguise,” speaking from and moving between the past and present simultaneously (Bruner, 1995). In play, this duality enables Paskow’s model of appropriation: by searching for my mother, or by following the fragmented linguistic pathways of the sketch, I encounter parts of myself that were formerly suppressed or disowned and am able to bypass certain obstinate realities formed from and stuck in memory.

The aesthetic catharsis that arises here is thus not an affective expulsion but a recognition, a slow peeling back made possible by the game form’s mimetic structuring. These recognitions are not conclusions I could have reached through recollection alone. They were afforded by the game’s procedural and formal operations: by mechanics that reproduced disorientation, by fragmented text that enacted bilingual asymmetry, by sound that refused coherence unless listened to as two separate cultural voices.

In this process, aesthetic catharsis becomes my analytic tool, a qualitative yet systematic way of tracing what the sketch has shifted, repaired, or divulged in me. Its function is to articulate the subtle recognitions and releases that emerge from designing, playing, and re-playing my own histories. Through the lens of aesthetic catharsis, “I (have) memorized these streets” can be understood as an experiment in rendering the instability of language and identity transparent and meaningful within the game form, enabling me to grasp in structured, playable terms what had previously been amorphous. Thus, the sketch achieves aesthetic catharsis not by resolving my past grievances but by making their emotional and structural logic intelligible, offering a mimetic crystallization of experiences I had previously only lived, not understood.

CONTRIBUTIONS

The contributions of this research build on and emerge from the principles of Reparative Game Design (RGD), repair, care, and share, by expanding RGD’s approach into a practical, repeatable methodology for making deeply personal games. While the content of *Like mother, like burr* is specific to my experience, the methodological structures that developed through the work form a transferable reparative approach. These contributions crystallize as five tenets that shaped my process and can guide other designers undertaking vulnerable, memory-driven, or self-expressive game-making.

Positioning

Adopting maker–player duality

I approached *Like mother, like burr* as a collection of game sketches that I’m making for myself and not the inevitable secondary player, and this dual positionality forms the crux of the research process. This positionality places the objective playability of a game, a quality made up of diegetic cues and recognizable game mechanics, as secondary to its maker-intended expressive capability.

I invite designers to center their own affective realities and histories. In this position, emotional response becomes data, confusion becomes insight, and self-play becomes a legitimate analytic mode. This contribution demonstrates how personal game-making can use the designer's shifting relationality to their own material as an engine of inquiry. This contribution demonstrates how treating the designer as both maker and primary player allows reparative work to occur through embodied engagement, enabling memories to be encountered from multiple temporal selves.

Materiality

Using personal archive as design material

Across the sketches, I rely on autoethnographic materials, such as field notes, photographs, self-translated bilingual text, and sound recordings from my immigrant upbringing. These materials serve not as decoration but as constitutive design elements, forming what I describe as a map not of geography but of sentiment.

This contribution shows how personal archives can structure mechanics, affective pacing, spatial logic, and narrative orientation in game design processes. Within a reparative practice, these materials become crucial artefacts in transforming private memory into procedural form.

Cycling

Practicing an iterative reparative methodology

A central contribution of the research is the operationalization of RGD's principles into a concrete, repeatable cycle. I describe my method in these cycles: self-writing → iterative making → self-play → theoretical reflections → revisions → repeat.

They occur as continual feedback loops, unable to be detangled. This methodological structure exemplifies how RGD's ethos of repair, care and share can be modeled into a repeatable, actionable methodology for personal game design.

Re-storying

Autobiographical reconstruction in play

I describe each sketch as "experiment, reflection, reproduction, and reckoning," and emphasize that recalling, remaking, and replaying memory can be seen as the heart of constructing one's personal catharsis. This process, which I call re-storying, reconstructs autobiographical material through the formal and procedural properties of games rather than through sole conventional narrative. Re-storying demonstrates how game form enables autobiographical memory to be reorganized into intentional and articulated structures.

Catharsis

*Culminating aesthetic and affective evaluatio*n

The final contribution is the use of aesthetic catharsis as an evaluative tool. I describe it as a qualitative but systemic way of assessing emotional change and the unit of

measurement for tracing what a sketch has repaired, shifted, or divulged in its game maker-player.

This form of catharsis reframes emotional response as intelligibility, an awareness of how the mimicry of mechanics renders memory coherent and structured. In this model, catharsis becomes the analytic culmination of this methodology: not an emotional purgation, but a recognition.

CONCLUSION

Together, these five contributions, positioning, materiality, cycling, re-storying, and catharsis, extend Reparative Game Design by offering a practical, reproducible model for making personal games. They provide designers with a structured way to work with memory, vulnerability, and affect, to truly make a game of one's own.

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