Reading queer autobiographical games through the lens of memory and identity studies

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relevance of literary-based memory and identity studies for understanding queer autobiographical videogames, thus providing an alternative to the framework of "empathy" which often dictates how such works are addressed in games research. Drawing on the writings of Candau (1998), Eakin (2005, 2008), Lejeune (1989), and Pollack (1992, 1993) we identify four analytical categories central to autobiographical genres – the autobiographical pact, the proper name, the homeostatic function, and the display of "normalcy" –, and apply them in close readings of the games *dys4ia* (Anthropy 2012), *Coming Out Simulator* (Case 2014), and *He Fucked the Girl Out of Me* (McCue 2022). Our analysis demonstrates both continuities and productive tensions between literary autobiography and queer digital life writing. We argue that memory and identity studies can illuminate how queer creators employ autobiographical games to document marginalized histories, challenge official memory, and resist hegemonic identity norms.

Keywords

queer game studies, autobiography, memory, identity, empathy

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to videogames produced by the queer community and, more specifically, autobiographical videogames that aim to represent the life experiences of queer developers, a topic that has been extensively debated and criticized is the purported ability of such games to engage the "empathy" of players – especially of those who do not share the marginalized identity/ies referenced by the game. Important indie works, such as Anna Anthropy's (2012) *dys4ia*, have often been studied, analyzed, and criticized – in academic as well as journalistic circles – through the interpretive framework of "empathy," and less often through the lens of memory and identity studies or traditional autobiographical theory.[1] Given the importance of autobiographical genres to the constitution of historical counternarratives, and as political tools for oppressed peoples and antihegemonic identities, it seems unreasonable that neither has played a more prominent role in guiding the debate around queer autobiographical games. Thus, in order to close this perceived theoretical gap, this paper aims to 1) test the pertinence of literary-based memory

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and identity studies to conceptualize queer games, and, consequently, 2) situate these games as recent developments in a long tradition of intimate art, confessional genres and life writing.

Based on the theoretical foundation provided by authors such as Joël Candau (1998), Michael Pollack (1992, 1993), Paul Eakin (2005, 2008), and Philippe Lejeune (1989), as well as on the literature review of recent works developed in the area of game studies about queer games and/or autobiographical games, this paper highlights a few analytical categories of common interest to both queer studies, and memory and identity studies. Subsequently, based on the close reading of three prominent queer autobiographical games, we attempt to provide answers to the following research questions: How have queer people employed digital media to tell their stories through autobiographical genres? How do videogames resemble and how do they differ from the purely verbal autobiographical genres theorized in the context of traditional memory and identity studies? Is this theoretical contribution still relevant to conceptualize queer autobiographical genres in digital media?

Our investigation concludes that literary-based memory and identity studies can still aid in the theorization of autobiographical genres in digital media by situating these works in the long-standing history of life writing, as well as by allowing a more precise understanding of the ways in which such games can contest official memory and overcome hegemonic notions of identity.

EMPATHY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN (QUEER) GAME STUDIES

The late 2010s are frequently identified as a crucial moment in the consolidation of queer game studies (Dalby 2024), marked especially by the publication of the anthology *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (2017), and, shortly thereafter, the Game Studies special issue *Queerness and Video Games*, organized by Ruberg and Amanda Phillips (2018). Scholars leading these efforts argued that the convergence of queer theory and game studies should not focus primarily on representations of LGBTQIA+ characters or on the presence of LGBTQIA+ players and developers in the industry – as had often been the case – but rather on the development of a new theoretical and political paradigm capable of recontextualizing how games are conceived, studied, critiqued, produced, and consumed both inside and outside academia (Ruberg & Phillips 2018; Ruberg & Shaw 2017). As Naomi Clark explains, the goal was for game studies to be able to borrow from queer theory the capacity of identifying

> […] unspoken norms by which a field of human activity or knowledge is operating, and finding points of rupture that destabilize those assumptions, opening up those fields to a wider and potentially more liberatory set of possibilities. (Clark 2017, 4)

This disciplinary consolidation is preceded by clear academic, artistic, and political foundations. Scholars often cite 2012–2013 as a cultural turning point for the inclusion of marginalized identities in game studies and game development (Pozo 2018; Dalby 2024, 7). Conferences and manifestos testify to the emergence of a queer community of players and developers who were both increasing in number and beginning to claim their space within videogame culture. This shift was facilitated by the proliferation of accessible development tools that opened digital creation to people historically excluded from technical training because of gender, race, class, or geopolitical

background. Such accessibility is often perceived by scholars as crucial to the development of both queer games (Alexander 2017, 60; Ruberg 2018, 548) and autobiographical games (Bercuci 2017, 21; Werning 2017, 30). Through these transformations, an industry that had moved increasingly toward specialization and commercial expansion became newly influenced by small-scale, intimate works – often produced by a single creator and deeply rooted in personal experience.

It is within this context that queer game studies achieved academic consolidation in 2017-2018. Since then, several recurring themes have emerged in the field, among which the question of empathy stands out. While some research within game studies advocates for the compatibility between games and empathy, or argues for the value of taking empathy as a guiding concept in game design (Belman & Flanagan 2010; Isbister 2016; Farber & Schrier 2021), the term acquired a decidedly negative inflection within queer game studies. Independent queer creators that gained prominence from 2012 onward were frequently approached by (usually white, heterosexual, cisgender) critics through the interpretive lens of empathy, with many of their works being labeled – often against the creators' explicit wishes – as "empathy games" (Brice 2017). As the term gained traction in media, industry, and academia (Ruberg 2020, 4–5), it encapsulated a series of problematic assumptions. The result was a widespread rejection of the label by the early creators associated with it (Pozo 2018; Ruberg 2020), and a critical examination by queer academics of empathy's politically regressive implications.

Mattie Brice (2017, 77) notes that the category of "empathy game," by carving out a niche within independent games, provides a veneer of progress and innovation while simultaneously commodifying difficult cultural topics and absolving mainstream games from the need to engage with empathy. Teddy Pozo (2018) argues that the empathy framework transforms the game's author – the target of empathy – into an object whose body and subjectivity are inhabited for the benefit of the player, often a heterosexual cisgender white man; moreover, that because empathy presupposes difference, it risks reinforcing the marginalization of LGBTQIA+ creators.

Bonnie Ruberg (2020) expands and systematizes this critique by identifying four major problems with empathy as a framework: it undervalues the lives and identities of queer developers by implying that a brief aesthetic encounter can grant players insight into a marginalized existence; it assumes that such games exist primarily for the sake of the education and self-improvement of heterosexual cisgender players; it encourages what Lisa Nakamura (2002, 40–44) terms "identity tourism," commodifying minority identities whilst simultaneously reinforcing stereotypes; and, finally, it diminishes the radical political potential of queer experiences by rendering them easily consumable and instrumentalizing them for the benefit of dominant subjectivities. Ruberg stresses, however, that these issues arise not from the games themselves or their queer developers, but from the use of empathy as "a framework through which to approach video games and the politics of affect" (Ruberg 2020, 14).

This critique becomes especially salient in relation to videogames with an explicit autobiographical premise. Rob Gallagher (2022), in theorizing independent autobiographical games, interrogates the widespread media assumption that such works "humanize" videogames as a whole by counterbalancing the power fantasies of mainstream commercial titles. Drawing on the critiques developed within queer game studies, Gallagher questions whether "humanity" and "empathy" should constitute

desired horizons for videogames at all. He argues instead that videogames are particularly well suited to destabilizing traditional autobiography.

In line with Gallagher, many scholars advocate for the capacity of digital media to subvert and transform traditional autobiographical structure. Recent scholarship stresses the ways in which digital autobiographies distance themselves from their literary counterparts by emphasizing the use of interactivity and procedurality in the process of meaning-making (Bercuci 2017; Chew & Mitchell 2019; Elias 2012; Farber & Schrier 2021; Werning 2017). Many also argue for the incompatibility between games and autobiographies by highlighting the tendency of autobiographical games to subvert conventional ludic expectations: since they recount real-life stories that admit no branching or alternative outcomes, these games prevent the player from altering major events, thus dramatically restricting player agency (Bercuci 2017; Chew & Mitchell 2019; Farber & Schrier 2021; Tenhaef 2025).

Notably, with a few exceptions (Chew 2017; Elias 2012; Tenhaef 2025), most of these scholars do not associate autobiographical games with the theorization of literary autobiography developed within memory and identity studies. Drawing on Lejeune (1989), Elias (2012) identifies the multimodality, rhizomatic structure, and collaborative dimension of digital autobiographies as distinctive features, thus concluding that "the options for [online] self-representation, its goals and the rhetorical concerns shaping it seem to diverge from, if not to be fundamentally different from, those shaping traditional print autobiography and memoir" (Elias 2012, 525). In turn, Tenhaef (2025), in analyzing Anna Anthropy's (2012) *dys4ia*, argues that the game adheres to a very traditional notion of autobiography as defined by Lejeune (1989) and, in this manner, becomes a very linear, "non-game-like" type of game. Therefore, both Elias and Tenhaef resort to Lejeune in order to question the suitability of literary-based autobiographical theory to explain digital life writing. Seeing as so much scholarly research emphasizing the incompatibilities of games and autobiographies exists, we believe that the alternative perspective advanced by this paper – which argues for a continuity between the two – can serve as a valuable catalyst for further debate.

EXPLORING THEORIES OF MEMORY, IDENTITY, AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

This section explores the foundation provided by memory and identity studies to the theorization of life writing and autobiographical genres. A comparative review of Candau (1998), Eakin (2005), Lejeune (1989), and Pollack (1992, 1993) points to four analytical categories that are central to literary-based autobiographical genres and that may also prove useful to understand the aesthetic and social workings of queer autobiographical videogames: 1) the establishment of an autobiographical pact between author (in this case, developer) and reader (in this case, player); 2) the proper name as identifier of the narrating subject; 3) the homeostatic function of the autobiographical narrative act; and 4) the socially determined conditions of "normalcy" that influence both the act of narrating oneself and the consequences of doing so.

With regards to the relationship between memory and identity, both Pollack (1992) and Candau (1998) agree on the constitutive role one assumes in the establishment of the other. Memory provides a sense of social as well as individual continuity/coherence to the reconstruction a person or group makes of their own

identity (Pollack 1992); and identity, in turn, plays an important role in selecting, transforming and molding that which is individually and socially remembered (Candau 1998). Both authors also agree on the narrative structure often assumed by this relationship: Pollack posits events, characters and places as the constitutive elements of memory – mirroring those of narrative theory –, whereas Candau explicitly refers to a subject's "narrative identity," which is fostered by memory.

In the intersection of memory, identity and narrative, the importance of autobiography as a genre capable of textually articulating these dimensions is made evident. Lejeune (1989), one of its most prominent scholars, famously locates in the notion of the "autobiographical pact" the principle that defines all confessional genres. For this pact to exist, it is necessary that an equivalence of identity be established between author, narrator, and character (Lejeune 1989, 5). The contract thus forged between reader and author on the basis of this identity pact enables the activation of reading conventions and the engendering of effects that are specific to autobiography (Lejeune 1989, 29).

For Lejeune, the author's proper name, disclosed on the book cover, represents the "deep subject of the autobiography" (Lejeune 1989, 20) and is the main element responsible for establishing the equivalence of identity that is at the base of the autobiographical pact. Lejeune (1989, 14) identifies two compositional procedures, at least one of which must be adopted for the autobiographical pact to hold: either the equivalence of author, narrator, and character is established by the narrator bearing the name of the author, or this identity is paratextually established – for instance, during an introductory section in which the narrator behaves as the author and assumes an explicit commitment of identity with the reader.

Candau (1998) also attributes to the proper name a central role in the interplay of memory and identity by stressing its function as a source of existential totalization, and its role in the maintenance, through time, of a coherent identity attributed to the subject by others. As a socially recognized shorthand for one's identity, as well as a stable point of self-recognition, the proper name thus represents a form of social control over the borders that define a subject's and a group's alterity, and reinforces the position of the Other against whom all identity is necessarily constructed (Pollack 1992, 204).

The proper name's function as a source of existential totalization evokes another topic of importance – the homeostatic function of memory, as theorized by Eakin (2005). Drawing on research in neurology and developmental psychology, and building on the hypothesis of a radical equivalence between a person's identity and their life history, Eakin (2005) argues that our "narrative identity" should be understood as one among several metabolic and psychological processes through which the human organism operates as a "homeostatic machine," constantly seeking to maintain its own stability: "I would extend this view of the human organism's homeostatic regulatory activity to include our endless fashioning of identity narratives, our performance of the autobiographical act" (Eakin 2005, 5). This view of the autobiographical act as fulfilling a necessary function of identity stabilization does not, however, entail that identity should be seen as a fixed and stable entity at the essence of a subject. On the contrary, Eakin (2005, 6) highlights that the homeostatic process implies constant transformation of both identity and memory: goals and desires for the future motivate ever new recollections of the past, and every recollection represents a new act of mental reconstruction of the self.

Finally, given the specificity of queer experience, it is also necessary to consider how to theoretically approach memories and identities that fall outside dominant social norms. Pollack (1993), in his efforts to construct oral historiographical accounts – a methodology that privileges minorities, outcasts, and marginalized peoples (Pollack 1993, 18) –, employs the concept of "underground memory" (*mémoire souterraine*) to describe the collective memories of social groups which oppose the dominant narratives of "official memory," typically sanctioned and produced via the power of the State. According to the author, such underground memories often remain silent or seemingly forgotten for long periods until sociopolitical conditions destabilize official memory enough to allow them to resurface. As such, the frontier that separates what can and cannot be said (*dicible et indicible*), and what can and cannot be confessed (*avouable et inavouable*), also serves to separate the underground collective memory of dominated groups from the organized collective memory a dominant group wishes to impose on society at large (Pollack 1993, 28).

Similarly, Eakin (2008) argues that, when we narrate ourselves – and thus build our own identities –, we rely on culturally established social constraints. The author identifies three implicit rules which govern the act of autobiographical narration, the violation of which can result in social, economic, or legal sanctions: telling the truth, respecting the privacy of others, and "displaying normalcy." The last of these is, for the author, the most revealing of "the prerequisites in our culture for being a person, for having and telling a life story" (Eakin 2008, 33). In reference to the case of institutionalization associated with gender dissidence in *Girl, Interrupted* (Kaysen 1993), Eakin recollects a specific passage in which Susanna Kaysen

> […] reports a therapist's comment that her diagnosis – borderline personality syndrome – is easily applied to "people whose lifestyles bother [those in a position to make diagnoses]" (151). We all know, moreover, that in various societies people inconveniently differing from some mainstream norm have been institutionalized or eliminated. What I am suggesting is the potential punishment confronting those who fail to display an appropriately normal model of narrative identity. This disciplinary possibility is latent in any enforcing of norms. (Eakin 2008, 45)

With the previous considerations in mind, it is our hope that the works and authors explored throughout this section may not only consolidate a theoretical foundation for the analysis of autobiographical genres in different media, but might also open critical pathways for understanding how queer autobiographical videogames articulate memory and identity within – and against – the constraints of dominant collective memory.

QUEER AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL GAMES THROUGH THE LENS OF MEMORY AND IDENTITY STUDIES

This section presents a close reading of the videogames *dys4ia* (Anthropy 2012), *Coming Out Simulator* (Case 2014) and *He Fucked the Girl Out of Me* (McCue 2022) guided by the four categories of 1) the autobiographical pact; 2) the proper name; 3) the homeostatic function; and 4) the display of "normalcy." Our analytical efforts aimed to answer the previously discussed research questions, namely: How have queer people employed digital media to tell their stories through autobiographical genres? How do videogames resemble and how do they differ from the purely verbal autobiographical genres theorized in the context of traditional memory and identity

studies? Is this theoretical contribution still relevant to conceptualize queer autobiographical genres in digital media?

A close reading of *dys4ia* (2012)

Anna Anthropy is a pioneer of independent, autobiographical queer games. One of her best-known works, *dys4ia* (Anthropy 2012) acquired rapid Internet fame upon publication and became one of the main works to garner media attention through the label of "empathy game." In *dys4ia*, Anthropy (2012) conveys her subjective experience as a trans woman – focusing on gender dysphoria and hormone replacement therapy – through an abstract representation that both employs and subverts the iconography and interactive conventions of videogames. The game consists of extremely brief minigames thematically assembled into four levels ("Gender bullshit," "Medical bullshit," "Hormonal bullshit," and "It gets better?"), in which the player is invited to control various objects and abstract figures that represent aspects of the author's experience. Minigames are usually accompanied by sentences written in the first person that work together with audiovisual and procedural language to present the perspective of the character/narrator.

As noted by other scholars (Tenhaef 2025), *dys4ia* tends to subvert the traditional win/lose structure of games either because the player is prevented from winning, or because neither winning nor losing have any influence over narrative development. The focus falls onto the meanings that can be derived from the interaction between the player and the available mechanics. As an example, the first minigame of the first level ("Gender bullshit") is accompanied by the sentence "I feel weird about my body." In it, the player is required to move a green piece through an irregular opening in a brick wall, only to discover that the shape of both the opening and the piece make the fit impossible. This combination of verbal, visual, and procedural signs (including, but not limited to, the denial of a win-state) suggests the interpretation that the author feels held back by hegemonic gender norms and expectations which her body is unable to fit.

Regarding both the autobiographical pact and the use of the author's proper name, *dys4ia* falls under a traditional structure as theorized by Lejeune (1989, 5). Even though there is not a distinctive player-character who is named after the author, pre-playable sections introduce Anna Anthropy's authorial name, followed by game title and a disclaimer of the game's autobiographical intentions (and limitations): "This is an autobiographical game about my experience with hormone replacement therapy. My experience isn't anyone's else's and is not meant to be representative of every trans person" (Anthropy 2012). This explanation is echoed in a paratextual report available on the website where the game can be currently downloaded, which reveals that the process of development might have resembled the writing of a diary more than that of a proper autobiography:

> In 2012, I made the decision to begin hormone replacement therapy. This game is about the next six months of my life, made up of playable vignettes I created at a rate of one or two a day.
> This Journal Game is not meant as a definitive guide to the process of HRT. It is an attempt at documenting the emotional experience of transitioning in the 2010s, created for other trans people who might have related. (Anthropy 2023)

Despite its traditional adherence to the autobiographical pact, *dys4ia* challenges the homeostatic function of narrative identity precisely because, being heavily influenced by the diary format, it is structured in such a way as to resist closure. Certain narrative issues – for example, the author's struggle with high blood pressure – remain unresolved and are deferred to an undetermined point in the future. Moreover, the refusal of identity closure and stabilization is repeatedly reinforced throughout the final level – such as in the question contained in the title "It gets better?", or in the final replacement of a customary "the end" with "just the beginning." As noted by Lejeune (2001, 103), this is the key distinction between autobiographies and diaries as forms of self-writing: if the autobiography is virtually complete from the outset, the diary is made virtually endless by continually postponing its own conclusion. By blending conventions from both genres, Anthropy (2012) subverts the autobiographical expectation of identity stabilization and could be said to bring to her game a perspective that is queer in all senses of the word – including in its political potential to challenge hegemonic norms.

Nevertheless, at the end of its final level, *dys4ia* still attempts to provide players with an aesthetic, if not narrative, type of closure. Mirroring the very beginning of the game, the last minigame once again positions the player as a piece in front of a brick wall. This time, however, the opening in the wall is determined by the player's destructive efforts during a previous reproduction of the famous *Breakout* (Wozniak et al. 1976), and the piece no longer holds a fixed form, its color and shape randomly transforming every few milliseconds. This configuration suggests the interpretation that the author embraces the beauty of this unending process of transformation as part of her identity as a trans woman, and celebrates her capacity to dismantle the rigid social systems that oppress her. In this manner, the parallel between the first and last scenes of *dys4ia* seem to offer a hopeful answer to the open question posed by the title of the fourth and final level: it does get better.

Finally, in relation to the rules of "normalcy" that regulate genres of life writing, all games here analyzed employ narrative to reflect on the consequences of living life while publicly adopting a queer identity – in other words, while failing to perform a hegemonic sense of normalcy. In Pollack's (1993) terms, these games can be interpreted as discursive contributions to the "underground memory" of a marginalized community – which, as the history of queer games and queer game studies shows, found in the Internet culture of the 2010s sufficiently favorable sociopolitical conditions to emerge.

Dys4ia's playable vignettes, for instance, record many types of daily aggressions with which trans women can identify – even though the author is careful to highlight that she did not intend to represent all trans people's experiences with her game. As such, while playing *dys4ia*, the player is called to witness the tension of using public restrooms amid judgmental cis women, and the medical transphobia inherent in the psychological evaluation forms required by many clinics. The acts of recording, reporting, and discursively denouncing these aggressions are not only a significant part of the process of identity building for trans individuals – which find themselves positioned outside of "normalcy" by the dominant groups of a transphobic society –, but may also be read as important sources of political identification at a collective level, because of how they disclose a shared experience of systemic oppression against which the trans community must mobilize.

A close reading of *Coming Out Simulator* (2014)

Nicky Case is another prominent indie developer whose semi-autobiographical *Coming Out Simulator* (2014) adopts a meta-referential style to tell the story of the night in which Case's parents find out about their bisexuality.[2] Gameplay focuses on simulated conversations and on the exploration of dialogue trees. The non-factual nature of many narrative paths is made explicit from the beginning, with an initial notice from the author warning that: "This game includes dialogue that I, my parents, and my ex-boyfriend actually said. As well as all the things we could have, should have, and never would have said. It doesn't matter which is which. Not anymore" (Case 2014). In the narrative section of gameplay concerning the fateful day, we are invited to control past-Nicky as a player-character and choose among predetermined dialogue options to try and guide the interaction with the parents towards a satisfying conclusion. Options range from antagonizing the parents, submitting to their demands, or outright lying to dodge the situation.

The main narrative is both followed and preceded by framing sections in which a future version of Nicky Case, now an NPC who is aware of being inside a game of their own making, talks directly to the player and provides meta-commentaries on the experience. The preceding section, for instance, while framed as a conversation, also fulfils the functions of menu and tutorial – acting both as a section for the presentation of paratextual information, and as a rehearsal, for the player, of the modes of interaction that will be available during gameplay. The vertical screen remediates (Bolter & Grusin 2000) the interface of a messaging app: lines of dialogue are presented inside rectangular speech bubbles, right-aligned for the player-character and left-aligned for non-player-characters, the most recent being positioned closest to the bottom. In this manner, future-Nicky introduces the title of the game and greets the player: "Hey there, player. Glad to have you for the next 20 minutes, I guess. What would you like to do now?" (Case 2014). At this point, three dialogue options are offered, corresponding to traditional options in a game menu: "Let's play this thing!"; "Who are you? (About me);" "Hm, tell me more. (About this game)."

Choosing the first option prompts future-Nicky into acknowledging the player's hurriedness ("No messing around with reading the About Me or the About This Game sections or--") before bringing up the subject of the semi-autobiographical and speculative nature of the game's narrative, eventually granting the player the possibility of asking "This 'true' game is full of lies?", to which future-Nicky replies: "Even if the dialogue was 100% accurate, it'd still be 100% lies" (Case 2014). The self-awareness of this exchange thus reminds the player of the artificial nature of any form of self-writing and threatens to destabilize the autobiographical pact no sooner than it is established. Given that, while controlling the character of past-Nicky, the player will have many opportunities – and, in fact, incentives – to lie to the parents about their sexuality, this breach in the autobiographical pact could be said to mirror the young character's situation, who must forge their identity while hiding it from their close ones.

However, although the player is explicitly invited to question the veracity of any events encountered during gameplay, this is still not enough to rescind the autobiographical pact that governs the reception of the work as a whole. Lejeune provides a convenient explanation for this phenomenon by theorizing that, in autobiographies, "it is identity that grounds resemblance" (1989, 24), not the contrary

– meaning that the matter of resemblance (to reality) is secondary and subordinate to the matter of a unified identity (of author and character). The latter having been established, only then can the question of fidelity to the facts be considered. Therefore, the meta-referential framing of *Coming Out Simulator*, while it may undermine the truthfulness of Case's report, paradoxically reinforces the authenticity of the author-character identification by allowing "direct" access to the author's thought process and intentions. In the spirit of Bolter and Grusin's (2000) famous thesis, the double remediation of Nicky-the-author – by both the character of past-Nicky, whom the player controls, and the character of future-Nicky, with whom the player converses – is the recourse through which the game attempts to establish with the player an illusion of immediacy.

The correspondence of identity provided by the proper name thus plays an important role in establishing the autobiographical pact in *Coming Out Simulator*. Moreover, the proper name as identity marker, so central to autobiographical writing in general, is thematically articulated by Case (2014) as to showcase how the affordances of the genre may be productively explored by the trans and non-binary community. In the game's "About Me" section, Nicky Case introduces themself by commenting: "That's not my legal name, it's just my REAL name" (Case 2014). Indeed, it is the name employed by both Nicky and their boyfriend throughout the game; however, the player will soon notice that the parents consistently call Nicky by their dead name. In the context of a game that aims to represent the fairly traumatic episode of a queer teenager "coming out" to LGBTQIA+ hostile parents, this discrepancy indicates how each character chooses to engage with Nicky: unlike the boyfriend, the parents purposefully alienate themselves from their child's asserted identity, opting instead to remain attached to a "version" of Nicky they have idealized.

Regarding the homeostatic function of autobiography, *Coming Out Simulator* initially seems to deny players the closure of a unified identity. Since narrative structure is based on divergent choices and forking paths, the absence of a single correct and conclusive version of events calls the player's attention to a multiplicity of possible "Nickys." This formal element can be interpreted as a statement on the precarious sense of self to which some queer kids, who are forced to hide their identities from their families, are subjected. The framing sections of the game, however, largely function to stabilize narrative meaning by reassuring the player that, despite the traumatic experience, Nicky managed to develop a healthy relationship with their queer identity.

In the concluding section, future-Nicky commits to telling the player three different versions of what happened after the events of that night, labelled: "the lie," "the truth," and "the half-truth." Players are then able to choose in which order they are told each story, although all three can be read in sequence. In this manner, even though the speculative structure of the story is maintained to the very end, an unambiguous "true" outcome is clearly communicated. By structuring their memories in narrative form, Case articulates past memories in connection to their current identity, thus fulfilling the homeostatic function of life writing. In the end, future-Nicky states: "You know, if I could go back and relive all my other possible choices… which in a sense, I did, by writing this game… I wouldn't change a thing" (Case 2014). The process of autobiographical game development is thus evoked as tool in the process of reaffirming and stabilizing identity.

Finally, the branching narrative of *Coming Out Simulator* also plays an important role in mapping out the rules of "normalcy" that are breached by queer identities. By choosing dialogue options in which past-Nicky is more vocal and assertive about their identity, the player faces graver instances of rejection and punishment from the parents: the mother vomits over her dinner plate, the father physically assaults Nicky etc. In this manner, the game makes clear what are the stakes involved in queer kids' display of non-normative identity. Nonetheless, attempting to hide past-Nicky's identity proves to be a useless endeavor, because midway through the game, it is revealed that Nicky's mother had already learned about their sexuality by violating their privacy and secretly reading through their texts. The conversation that follows, which feels much like a punishment, is therefore framed as inevitable. A queer-positive rhetoric is thus enforced by the game, because no happy ending – no win-state – can be accomplished by way of forcefully displaying a hegemonic (in this case, heterosexual) identity.

A close reading of *He Fucked the Girl Out of Me* (2022)

Taylor McCue's (2022) *He Fucked the Girl Out of Me* tells the story of the author's experience with sex work as a young trans woman and reports on the trauma caused by that experience. Gameplay is marked by linear narrative progression and a purposefully crafted lack of agency. Encountering a fragmented and allegorical narrative/visual style, players explore the gameworld while text boxes written in the first person convey the author's perspective of events. Players are occasionally asked to make a choice, or to complete a task, with little effect on the overall narrative. Heavy themes are explored, such as mental illness, the economic and social vulnerability of trans people, police violence, and online harassment of sex workers. The game includes several content warnings and is framed by the creator as both an act of vulnerability and a confrontation with a painful personal history.

Upon initiating the game, players immediately find themselves controlling the character of a little pixelated ghost. As in *Coming Out Simulator*, the imparting of paratextual information and the narration of story events are deliberately mixed – here, however, there is no temporal gap or metacommentary to aid the player in parsing one from the other. Walking the little ghost to the right into the edge of the screen causes a text box with the question "Would you like to see trigger warnings?" to appear. If the player responds affirmatively, it is among the optional trigger warnings that the first indicator of the autobiographical pact can be found: "This game is made of memories. Those memories are about sex work. I've fictionalized them. That is the only way I can get close to the truth without making it messy" (McCue 2022). This inconspicuous autobiographical relationship is made even more tenuous by the fact that the presentation of an authorial name is deferred until the very end of the game, when closing credits discreetly state "Game by: Taylor McCue." In this manner, since neither the matter of identification between author and character nor the matter of resemblance to reality are firmly established, players experience McCue's autobiography in much the same way as the author herself reports to have experienced the recollection of her long-buried traumatic memories – as uncertain, fragmented, and marred by gaps and imprecisions.

The proper name of the author/main character plays an important thematic role in McCue's work. As mentioned, authorial name is not presented at the beginning, as is customary, being instead revealed only in the end. In the meantime, the main character is identified by many names – including the social name she herself uses,

the alias she employs during sex work, and the dead name still used by her mother –, none of which correspond to the authorial name of Taylor McCue. This multiplicity of proper names works to represent an identity deeply fragmented and ultimately lost by many different types of trauma – such as the trauma of institutionalized transphobia and the trauma of doing sex work while in a socially vulnerable position. Since the proper name, as signifier of a unified identity – of author and character, but also of past-self and present-self –, is one of the foundational pillars of autobiographical genres, this example illustrates how queer individuals are capable of articulating autobiographical form in uniquely meaningful ways: for instance, by revealing the tension between the identity that is socially imparted on us from birth, and the identity(ies) we effectively develop throughout our lives.

These core elements of autobiography – the pact and the proper name – influence, in turn, how *He Fucked the Girl Out of Me* relates to the homeostatic function of the genre. The themes of identity fragmentation, multiplicity and uncertainty are frequently addressed throughout the game, such as in the visual representation of the player-character. Most often pictured as a ghost, the character of Ann, who stands in for the authorial figure of Taylor McCue, is also occasionally presented as a glitching square, a faceless woman, or as a girl with a melting face and body. All of these visual representations converge in that they symbolize the loss of a stable sense of identity. Like the shadowy remnants of a once-living being, or the malfunctioning variant of a piece of software, the character finds herself dissociated from the version of her she once knew. The author explicitly associates this loss of identity to a trauma-induced loss of memory: "The problem is, as I get closer to the truth, my memory fails. Things become more fragmented, more painful" (McCue, 2022).

Significantly, the only times Ann is depicted as a "normal" girl are during instances in which she is with a client. In much the say way that she assumes different aliases during sex work, it could be interpreted that the "normalcy" of her appearance in these scenes represents the façade of a coherent identity she puts forward for her clients, while the dissolution of her own sense of self remains hidden. The game thus presents an inverted view of homeostatic regulation as it is usually found in autobiographies: "false" identity is presented as unitary and coherent, whereas "true" identity is fragmented and ungraspable. In this manner, the story unraveled by players is not so much that of how someone's memories and identity came *to be*, but that of how someone's memories and identity came *to be lost* due to acute trauma.

Finally, *He Fucked the Girl Out of Me*, by intersecting the trans experience with that of sex work, discusses a much graver type of social punishment for the failure to display "normalcy": that of criminalization. From the obstacles of illegally accessing hormones to the criminalization of sex work, McCue's autobiography shows how trans people are effectively pushed to the margins of society. Crucially, however, the author calls attention to the fact that criminalization is also a way to prevent trans people from publicly telling their own stories and affirming their own identities: "It's impossible to get help if you can't tell anyone why. This is why criminalization becomes painful. This is why stigma hurts. Shame isolates you. It eats into you slowly over time" (McCue 2022). She reports her own experience of having to hide her sex work history from friends and family, and even of having to radically edit her game to protect herself and others from legal repercussions.

The act of autobiographical narration is, therefore, a risk for those who find themselves outside of "normalcy." The fact that it is carried out even under these

circumstances configures an act of resistance and may return us, once again, to the homeostatic function and political potential of autobiography: McCue's telling of her story through the tool of a semi-autobiographical game can be interpreted as way of addressing her trauma, reclaiming her memories of sex work and, consequently, as an attempt of coming to terms with her own identity – all the while pushing back against the criminalization that forced her silence for so long.

CONCLUSIONS

We conclude that memory and identity studies are an appropriate framework through which queer autobiographical games can be analyzed, thus offering a productive alternative to the paradigm of "empathy" that seems to dominate academic/critical discourse about these works. The analytical categories proposed here – the autobiographical pact, the proper name, the homeostatic function, and the display of "normalcy" –, which have been derived from memory and identity studies, proved to be a valuable tool in the analysis and interpretation of the selected games. Additionally, we hope to have traced a clear continuity between digital autobiographical genres and traditional, literary-based forms of life writing – in opposition to the pronounced divide previously defended by game studies scholars (Elias 2012, Gallagher 2022, Tenhaef 2025). It is our view that dismissing this continuity would be to risk narrowing our comprehension of digital autobiographies, disregarding queer contributions to the cultural production of collective memory, and denying queer people the right to employ this longstanding tool of identity-making for the benefit of their own communities.

A close reading of the three selected games has revealed both compatibilities and productive tensions in their approaches to the traditional elements of autobiography. The autobiographical pact is always established, although it may be questioned or deferred in reference to the need, faced by many queer people, to fabricate/hide certain parts of their identity from friends, family, and society at large. Proper names are multiplied in response to fragmented identities and weaponized by parents who refuse to recognize the gender/sexuality of their children. The homeostatic function of life writing is denied by the multilinear structure of digital narratives, but also reaffirmed in the very act of game development, inasmuch as the autobiographical form is employed by individuals to provide meaning and closure to their queer experiences. Finally, the rules of "normalcy" imposed by dominant groups are resisted, and the punishments inflicted by breaching these rules are denounced. The affordances of autobiographical genres are thus shown to be suitable to the exploration of themes that are relevant to queer communities, whereas queer individuals, by taking hold of autobiographical genres to tell their stories, manage to shed new light on these affordances and imaginatively reinvent these genres.

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ENDNOTES

[1] For instance, a quick Google Scholar survey on May 1, 2026 reveals that results for the combination of keywords "dys4ia" and "empathy" (285) are almost as numerous as the results for the combination of "dys4ia" and "autobiography" (68), "autobiographical" (205), and "life writing" (20) combined.

[2] Although the 2014 game focuses on matters of sexuality, not gender, it should be noted that Nicky Case also holds a genderqueer identity and uses both she/her and they/them pronouns.