Abstract

This essay seeks to explore the subjects of choice, agency, and endings in the 20th Century LGBT novel and the contemporary videogame. Making use of Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg's *Queer Game Studies*, it wishes to connect the disruption of narrative normativity inherent in the LGBT novel and the concept of narrative plurality in gaming, considering how these might work to depict identity formation and 'queer' their respective narratives. It seeks to examine choice as moments of narrative potential while also steering clear of the critical 'utopianism' which suggests videogames should necessarily seek non-linear narrative structures. The essay hopes to find common ground between the two distinct mediums, specifically considering choice and lack of choice in particular narratives, as well as the ways in which their endings might struggle to realise themselves.

Choice, Agency, and Endings: Videogames and the 20th Century LGBT Novel

ELIZABETH: Booker…you don't leave this room until you do.

ROBERT LUTECE: Dewitt? Time is running short. Bring us the girl, and wipe away

      the debt.

[Action prompt: *Pick up baby*]

Handover of Elizabeth, *Bioshock Infinite*[1]

This is an essay about agency and choice, both in their relation to endings but also independently, as

moments of narrative 'potential'. It is also, as a result of these interests, an essay about the

troublesomeness of endings; the near-impossibility of certain closures to be 'at once true and kind':[2]

'true' to their mediums or to the realities of their social and political contexts, and 'kind', somehow,

or at least not damning, especially of that which they may wish not to condemn. I hope to argue that

these particular grapplings, with matters of choice, agency, and endings, have been key

preoccupations in two very different but nonetheless emergent modes within the last hundred years:

the first is in the LGBT novel (most notably in 'identity formation'), and the second is in videogames,

particularly, but not limited to, the modern adventure game and first-person shooter. In these mediums

there are hopes, expectations, and idealisations of their endings, tempered by certain realities, and I

argue that their negotiations of 'choice' in narrative are not necessarily so far apart as we may suspect.

The ways videogames have differed from and hearkened back to the linearity of 'traditional' written

narrative can be enlightening in our consideration of the themes in which they share an interest.[3]

There has been, and may well continue to be, a certain utopianism in the criticism and theory

of videogames: the prospects of an interactive form of storytelling, a medium which might allow for

the 'reader-player' to in some sense determine narrative and its attending meaning through the acts of

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[1] *Bioshock Infinite*, developed by Irrational Games (2K Games, 2013) [electronic media]; all
transcriptions my own.
[2] Philip Larkin, 'Talking in Bed', in *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber, 1964), p. 29.
[3] For videogames in relation to 'traditional' storytelling, see Jonathan Ostenson, 'Exploring the
Boundaries of Narrative: Video Games in the English Classroom', *The English Journal,* 102.6 (July
2013), 71-78 (p. 76).

choice and play.[4] Perhaps this very phrasing is provocative in the realm of literary criticism, redolent of some postmodern ideal in which the reader works 'to actively construct a meaning from the text he is given'.[5] While this is not an essay about postmodernism, we ought to identify a parallel in thought between the reader's 'active construction' of meaning from the text and the gamer's 'active construction' of meaning both in their interpretation and in the choices the game allows them to make. This, however, is what I mean by a 'utopianism': the idea that because the medium allows for this kind of active construction, perhaps better than any other medium, it ought to. Jelle van der Ster identifies a tension in this respect, between the influence of the player and the desire of a developer to tell a story.[6] While Barthes would no doubt have approved of the diminishment of the 'author', the reality is that these paths a player can take are most often preconstructed rather than, say, randomly generated.[7] The iconic choice in *The Stanley Parable* (2013) to walk through the right door rather than the left (as specified by the narrator) is of course an equally viable, predetermined route.[8] There is rarely any escape from the development team's design, even if that design takes such a seemingly convoluted form as it does in *The Stanley Parable*. 'Narrative', then, is apparent even in some of the most choice-driven of games: a preordained story for the player to uncover and enact during play, accommodating any of the alleged freedoms or choices offered. In fact, the greater the capacity of the player to guide the narrative course of their playthrough (leading towards, say, one of several endings) the more the development team's resources are spread, promoting in turn the limitation and management of choice. For such reasons, perhaps, a great majority of current, critically acclaimed titles in terms of storytelling are very often games with a more linear, even 'traditional' structure. *The Last of Us* (2013), The *Vanishing of Ethan Carter* (2014), *Inside* (2016), *Night in the Woods* (2017), *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017): these are just some of the many games applauded for their story, design, and narrative delivery, and all of them share a certain linearity in terms of a main,

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[4] For 'reader-player', see Ostenson, p. 76.

[5] Jelle van der Ster, 'Lost in the Funhouse: Postmodern Meta-reflections in Videogames', available online at *Citeseerx* <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.94.4737&rep=rep1&type=pdf> [accessed 23 October 2018], p. 4.

[6] Jelle van der Ster, p. 1.

[7] See Barthes' 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 142-48.

[8] *The Stanley Parable*, developed by Galactic Cafe (Galactic Cafe, 2013) [electronic media].

overarching narrative.[9] Regardless of the choices they may well provide along the way, the subplots they might allow for, they all, in short, lead to a single possible ending (aside from some minor variation in *Night in the Woods*, with interchangeable positions for Greggory and Beatrice).[10] It is this linearity within a medium of such potential that is particularly revealing, not only in respect to storytelling, but in terms of choice and agency within those narratives. I will argue that videogame narrative changes the meaning of the terms we use to understand narrative more broadly, and that this is especially pertinent to those written narratives which are themselves preoccupied with similar terms and interests.

The LGBT novel, specifically, has a stake in these matters. Their narratives of identity formation, of the negotiation of sexuality within their given social and historical contexts, means that there are limited possibilities for how they and their characters can develop. In the opening chapter of E.M. Forster's *Maurice* (1971),[11] for example, Mr Ducie preaches to our young, impressionable protagonist:

> He spoke of the ideal man – chaste with asceticism. He sketched the glory of Woman. Engaged to be married himself, he grew more human […] To love a noble woman, to protect and serve her – this, he told the little boy, was the crown of life. […] It all hangs together – all – and God's in his heaven, All's right with the world. Male and female! Ah wonderful![12]

Mr Ducie sets down the authorised path: an idealised, uncomplicated heterosexuality. It is an ode to the binary, infallible order of 'male and female', syntactically matched in the separate 'ideal man' and 'glory of Woman' sentences. *Ideal*, quite explicitly, uncompromising in its didacticism. Even here it

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[9] At the British Academy Games Awards: *The Last of Us* winning five awards, including Best Game and Story (2013); *The Vanish of Ethan Carter* winning in Game Innovation (2015); *Inside* winning four awards, including ones for Artistic Achievement, Game Design, and Narrative (2016); *Night in the Woods* and *What Remains of Edith Finch* having won Narrative and Best Game respectively (2017).

[10] *Night in the Woods*, developed by Infinite Fall (Finji, 2017) [electronic media].

[11] E.M. Forster, *Maurice*, ed. by P.N. Furbank (London: Penguin, 2005). First draft written 1913-14 with revisions in 1932 and 1959-60; published posthumously in 1971. All further references to the text will be to this 2005 edition.

[12] *Maurice*, p. 10.

seems an untenably oppressive order: Maurice replies, 'I think I shall not marry'.[13] The generational

passing-down of values is immediately questioned by our protagonist's own, admittedly fragile, sense

of agency. The adult order of the world introduced to us is one which, while not necessarily

malicious, is oppressive in its expectations. Maurice's mother's own ideal, that he may 'grow up like

[his] dear father in every way', is of course another contribution to such an order; one which Maurice

seems at least implicitly troubled by.[14] Yet expectations cannot expunge agency, and, in fact, they

cannot even expunge curiosity: 'A check, a silence, fell upon the complex processes, and very timidly

the youth began to look around him'.[15] It cannot stop, in other words, an instinctual curiosity nor,

perhaps implicitly, the desire to make one's life one's own. This of course is a large part of what

Maurice might illustrate: taking control of one's life in the face of society; in accepting difficult truths

as opposed to reassuring falsehoods. On one occasion, Maurice observes, 'Everyone and everything

had suddenly harmonized', to which he asks himself, 'Was this the world?'.[16] Maurice finds a world

conspicuously uncompromised by uncertainty or contradiction; one which, in being so, invites that

very contradiction it seems to lack. Subsequently, the dissatisfied question entertains the possibility of

what it might mean to challenge the prevailing order; to 'queer':

> Queerness, at its heart, can be defined as the desire to live life otherwise, by
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> questioning and living outside of normative boundaries.[17]

At its core, the phrase 'to queer' aspires towards the 'nonnormative', particularly within matters of

sexuality, but indeed it extends further than that.[18] The work of queer theory within literary studies,

for example, demonstrates just what the 'queer' might allow us to consider, not only in narrative

content and thematic interests but also in narrative conventions and structures themselves. It allows us

to consider what sorts of 'nonnormative' potential are available within texts, explored or otherwise,

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[13] *Maurice*, p. 10.
[14] *Maurice*, p. 12.
[15] *Maurice*, p. 18.
[16] *Maurice*, p. 20.
[17] Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg, 'Imagining Queer Game Studies', in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. by Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. ix-xxxiii (p. x).
[18] For 'nonnormative', see Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg, p. xvi.

and even encourages us to consider what might make an ending 'queer'.[19] For our purposes, it is worth acknowledging a recent intersection between queer theory and game studies (as we find in Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg's *Queer Game Studies*). The intersection seeks to identify unspoken norms and points of rupture that might disturb them; to consider, within the context of videogames, the relationship between power structures and agency, how lived experiences challenge structure, and how systems allow for opportunities of resistance.[20] As Shaw and Ruberg put it, a large part of what the intersection might allow for is:

> a commitment to seeing differently, to finding the marginalized in between the lines, and to unlocking the nonnormative potential that has been waiting in video games all along.[21]

What might this 'nonnormative potential' look like in the videogame and the novel? What forms might it take; what narrative courses might it allow for, particularly in regard to how they end? For Maurice, a door is open as early as the first chapter, or at the very least there is a scepticism towards convention which keeps it from closing completely. To connect the disruption of narrative normativity in the LGBT novel and the concept of narrative plurality in gaming, we might inspect one recent game in particular: Dontnod's *Life is Strange* (2015).[22]

Life is Strange generates moments of potential throughout each of its five episodes: Max's ability to reverse time (a seeming 'undo' button built within the game) allows the player to reattempt encounters and prevent certain outcomes. The butterfly symbol which appears in the top right of the screen notifies us that the choice we have made will have consequences and that, by extension, we are welcome to rewind and change the end result. The opportunities this feature allows for, both in gameplay and in the narrative, can hardly be overstated. Perhaps one way of looking at this feature is in its demonstration that there are innumerable potentials within a single day alone. At least in its

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[19] See Judith Roof's consideration of unconventional endings in her *Come as You Are: Sexuality & Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), esp. p. 6.

[20] Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg, p. xii.

[21] Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg, p. xxii.

[22] *Life is Strange*, developed by Dontnod Entertainment (Square Enix, 2015) [electronic media]; all transcriptions my own.

early stages, the game seems unoppressive, perhaps even optimistic considering one of the earliest

uses of this power is in saving Max's friend Chloe from a gunshot. While the implementation of this

feature in and of itself might allow for 'nonnormative potential', it is worth considering a particular

instance of this. Throughout the game we are given the opportunity to cultivate certain friendships and

relationships, experimenting with dialogue options and finding ways to help other characters.

Depending on some of the choices made depends how Max's relationship with Chloe and Warren

develops: it can culminate in Max sharing a kiss with Warren but it can equally culminate in a kiss

with Chloe during the final moments of the game. While Warren's crush on Max is suggested

throughout the game, Chloe's (if it is implied at all) is subtler. By extension, Chloe's bisexuality

becomes a side or variant of the story dependent on Max's choices. The player does not have to

develop either friendship/relationship to this extent, but the game provides a space for that potential to

be explored.

Returning to Forster's novel, these 'moments of potential' can just as readily be shut off.

When Clive confesses his feelings at the end of Chapter 9, Maurice provides an unhesitatingly self-

righteous response. '[S]hocked [to] the bottom of his suburban soul',[23] Maurice has since become a

mouthpiece for the values impressed on him:

> 'Oh, rot!' The words, the manner, were out of him before he could recall them.
>
> 'Durham, you're an Englishman. I'm another. Don't talk nonsense. I'm not offended,
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> because I know you don't mean it, but it's the only subject absolutely beyond the
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> limit as you know, it's the worst crime in the calendar, and you must never mention it
>
> again. Durham! a rotten notion really—'[24]

The involuntariness of it and the stilted, prudish tone of his speech ('Oh, rot!', 'a rotten notion really')

betrays a voice that is not entirely his own. Clive, of course, rushes out of the room without a word.

The moment is lost. Maurice's realisation, his 'coming to terms' (or at least the beginning of it),

comes too late: 'New worlds broke loose in him at this, and he saw from the vastness of the ruin what

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[23] *Maurice*, p. 48.
[24] *Maurice*, p. 48.

ecstasy he had lost, what a communion'.[25] Maurice realises that '[h]e had lied'; had 'been fed upon lies' in his life so far.[26] His resolution changes:

> His first resolve was to be more careful in the future. He would live straight, not
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> because it mattered to anyone now, but for the sake of the game. He would not
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> deceive himself so much. He would not – and this was the test – pretend to care about
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> women when the only sex that attracted him was his own. He loved men and always
>
> had loved them. He longed to embrace them and mingle his being with theirs. Now
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> that the man who returned his love had been lost, he admitted this.[27]

It is as much a realisation of change as it is a realisation of loss, the two recognitions spurring on the other. For our purposes, the second sentence is particularly provocative, and is perhaps trickier to unpack than we may first suspect. '[T]he game' should be implicit, with the definitive article figuring it as an established entity along with its implied spoken and unspoken 'rules'. There is a constriction to the 'game', a certain arbitrariness or, more accurately, conventionality whereby lines are drawn, boundaries marked, and styles of play accepted or condemned. And what of 'liv[ing] straight'? The *OED* offers a 1941 example as its earliest instance of 'straight as heterosexual'. Is it then anachronistic to assume this refers to a conventional, societally-perpetuated game of 'playing' in order to survive? A necessary part of 'be[ing] more careful' in terms of one's future and not ending up as one of those 'unspeakables of the Oscar Wilde sort'?[28] Perhaps 'liv[ing] straight' is meant in the sense of living true to oneself, relevant to the succeeding line of 'not deceiv[ing] himself so much'. But then we might ask what becomes of 'the game', be it of life or sexuality. Perhaps this is a more tenable interpretation, yet is there really so little investment, such a capacity for distance on Maurice's part that this deep preoccupation of his can be distinguished as some self-evident 'game'? The kind of playful openness to experimentation and choice allowed in *Life is Strange*, even in matters of sexuality, perhaps lends itself to a different, more liberating conception of 'game', whereas *Maurice*

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[25] *Maurice*, p. 49.
[26] *Maurice*, p. 51.
[27] *Maurice*, p. 51.
[28] *Maurice*, p. 135.

does not and perhaps cannot allow for such playfulness, not only in the medium itself (the linearity implied by the remaining leaves of a book) but in a social and historical context which so thoroughly restricts choice and dampens agency. In *Maurice*, there is only one course of action to be taken; little to no reconsideration is permitted of that choice. Hence, things are 'lost', as they are here, when they are decided for their one and only time. Moments of 'nonnormative potential' in the novel and the videogame are both consequential but whereas *Life is Strange* can and does allow for reattempts *Maurice* illustrates fixed, non-negotiable consequences. 'Regret' is an agent for reflection in the written medium; in the videogame, it can be an agent for renegotiation. And where *Life is Strange* uses its medium to present a more flexible image of sexuality (the player themselves able to choose between heterosexual and homosexual relations), *Maurice* presents sexuality as something which cannot so easily be negotiated. What Forster offers, in light of social context, is a story full of potentials and dead ends, denying us the romantic narrative arc until the novel's resolution.

Maurice's openness, towards himself and his sexuality, preserves a certain potential in spite of the stifling heteronormativity of the society he finds himself in. His thoughts in the first few chapters, in their opposition to the expectations of several adult figures, have no doubt been suggestive of this. Yet when we talk about 'potential' we cannot think of it only in the sense of personal growth. In the LGBT novel, there is often, if not equally, a potential for catastrophe, for closedness in our protagonist, such as we find in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956). Perhaps it is foreshadowing, or perhaps it only seems to be in light of the novel's resolution, but either way some disconcerting signs are there from the beginning:

> Joey's body was brown, was sweaty, the most beautiful creation I have ever seen till then. I would have touched him to wake him up but something stopped me. I was suddenly afraid. Perhaps it was because he looked so innocent lying there, with such perfect trust; perhaps it was because he was so much smaller than me; my own body suddenly seemed gross and crushing and the desire which was rising in me seemed monstrous. But, above all, I was suddenly afraid. It was borne in on me: *But Joey is a boy*, I saw suddenly the power in his thighs, in his arms, and in his loosely curled

fists. The power and the promise and the mystery of that body made me suddenly

afraid.[29]

David's experience with Joey might serve as a case study, a preliminary relationship to his one with

Giovanni. More pressingly, however, there is David's relationship with his own mind and desires. In

modern terms we might refer to it as 'internalised homophobia', but if such a term is to be useful it

should perhaps be considered more as an umbrella term for certain tendencies of thought and defence

mechanisms. A recognition would need to be made of the psychological intricacies Baldwin has

developed in his novel: of fear, self-deceit, avoidance and reticence, perhaps even of self-

destructiveness. Much of this helps us come to better understand David by the end of the novel, and

much of this is presaged in this one, demonstrative moment: the way in which doubt, an inexplicable

sense of dread (of being suddenly stopped by yourself), and self-disgust corrupt the scene. The

physical intimacy, along with Joey's body itself, is transformed by the private workings of David's

mind; manifested in the affective response he can only observe ('I was suddenly afraid') and the tonal

shift from beauty, creation, and innocence, to fear, self-disgust, and the connection of 'desire' and the

'monstrous'. He gives no explanations to Joey, reveals none of his thoughts, and drives him out

instead. It is an unsettlingly similar formula to that which we see with Giovanni, albeit that the precise

source of his fears becomes a little trickier to pinpoint (and that Giovanni puts up more resistance).

David's insecurity pulls him towards disaster, serving as an internal, fatalistic mechanism which

enables his self-destructive patterns of thought:

Each day he invited me to witness how he had changed, how love had changed him,

how he worked and sang and cherished me. I was in a terrible confusion. Sometimes I

thought, but this *is* your life. Stop fighting it. Stop fighting. Or I thought, but I am

happy. And he loves me. I am safe. Sometimes, when he was not near me, I thought, I

will never let him touch me again.[30]

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[29] James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, in *James Baldwin: Early Novels and Stories*, ed. by Toni
Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), pp. 225-26. All further references to the text will be
to this edition.
[30] *Giovanni's Room*, pp. 291-92.

The psychological intimacy offered by the first-person narration allows insight into the tumultuousness of David's mind, an intimacy not afforded to the other characters, and one which provides an expressive snapshot of queer experience and identity formation (in a more pessimistic light). The syntax of the passage betrays something of him: the disjunction between the emotional tone of one sentence and the next, the false resolution and assurance of those paratactic, more imperative sentence constructions. It feels as though there ought to be some conjunction, some connective between the innocent, whimsical tripling of Giovanni's working, singing, and cherishing and the 'terrible confusion' it inspires (as if there were some private logic behind the syntax). The discordance in David's mind is such that doubt and fear emerge from love and affection; it is the sort of mind that finds every reason, as host and as kinsman, not to do a deed and yet does it anyway.[31] Beyond his remarks that he doesn't know what he wants, and beyond his remarks that he was lying to himself more than anyone,[32] comes something incisive which perhaps only someone else can identify for him:

> Then you can shout it to those hills out there, shout it to the peasants, how guilty you
> are, how you love to be guilty![33]

How you love to be guilty. The personal 'confess[ions]', the motif of dirtiness and purity, the salt and scouring of the end, the 'repent[ance]' in the beginning, regardless of whether or not Hella's comment is necessarily 'true' all of this fits together so well under such an understanding.[34] The narrative instance itself (relaying as a form of reliving) is a kind of penance, in light of what cannot be undone and what is only known in retrospect. What's at stake in the novel's dramatization and syntactical representations of choice and potential is agency: the agency that the 'self' in David's self-hate, self-deception, and self-destruction imply. Perhaps the reason David can be both pitiable and largely

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[31] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. by Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), I. 7. 13-14.
[32] *Giovanni's Room*, p. 353; p. 355.
[33] *Giovanni's Room*, p. 355.
[34] *Giovanni's Room*, p. 311; esp. p. 267; p. 360; p. 233.

responsible comes from avoidable disasters and inevitable, deep-rooted, self-defeating psychological tendencies.[35]

From agency, the relationship between reader and protagonist, and from an understanding of the avoidable yet inevitable (perhaps more an illusion of the avoidable), we now turn towards a game of a similar complexity and fatalism. *Bioshock Infinite* readily implies what it does not deliver: how can a game featuring interdimensional tears and travel, of 'infinite' possibilities and other worlds, possibly be so fatalistic? Despite the mesmerising, visual expansiveness of the game's setting, the city of 'Columbia', players soon find a certain linearity to the game. Most locations cannot be returned to once left, previous paths and timelines are closed off, and the player spends most of it moving from objective to objective, location to location, as though it were somewhat of an 'on-rails experience' (the classic 'rail shooter' sub-genre coming to mind, restricting the player to a set course of movement while they aim). There are few narrative moments of rest and few safehouses in gameplay, meaning we are relentlessly on the move from start to finish. It is no doubt to be expected, being a first-person shooter rather than, say, an open world game, RPG, or adventure game (and the more leisurely exploration those genres often allow for), but it also plays heavily into the deterministic tone of the game's ending. The few 'choices' the player is presented with are either illusory or seemingly too trivial to matter: the Luteces' 'bird or the cage' as an example of the latter, while their earlier 'heads or tails' restricts the player to flipping a coin so that Booker (our protagonist) invariably calls heads on our behalf. The player has no influence over the direction of the game's narrative, and when they are given 'control' they are only really given it in the non-sense of deciding when inevitable events take place. The finale, in particular, practically restricts the player to the pressing of a single button, using it to bring down Elizabeth's tower (one of the most important moments in the game's story, thereby starting the end-sequence) as well as to simply climb ladders and open doors, following Elizabeth into the next area. And, of course, the game has us live through a flashback in which Booker makes the disastrous decision to hand over his newborn daughter (a young Elizabeth). Except, as illustrated in the opening example of this essay, this isn't really a choice by the time we live through

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[35] From David Hillman's discussion of inevitability, 'avoidable' disasters, and tragedy: 'Hamlet', Lecture, Faculty of English, Cambridge, 15 October 2018.

it: 'you don't leave this room until you do', as Elizabeth puts it. It is in these moments that *Bioshock Infinite* feels less like a game and more like an interactive cutscene. Elizabeth's remark works not only on the level of narrative (being a flashback, Booker necessarily will hand her over) but on the level of gameplay: the player literally can't leave the room until he or she has Booker make the transaction which begins the game's events.

It is here that we should address a matter of conflation which is, in fact, a crucial distinction for understanding the way this moment works. Up until this point I have mostly been using the game's protagonist and the player interchangeably, and to an extent this makes sense: the player is, after all, controlling the protagonist and inhabiting their skin to enter the game's world. Here, however, we should think of a distinction: the protagonist as *character* and the protagonist as *avatar*.[36] 'Character' in the same sense that it applies in novels, films, shows, and other 'non-interactive' mediums, namely a distinct individual, personality, and their tendencies towards making certain choices. 'Avatar', however, is unique to the interactive medium, serving as a vessel for the player to inhabit, control, and potentially customise. Saying this, there are nonetheless certain parallels between the first-person avatar and the 'focalising' character of written narrative, wherein experience comes to us through the eyes of another.[37] The subtlety and complexity of this and of the interaction between the avatar and character could be worthy of an entirely separate dissertation, but for our purposes we may simply wish to consider the way it is so deceptively used in *Bioshock Infinite*. We are in control of Booker, we may even feel we 'are' him for the large majority of the gameplay experience, and yet it is in these key narrative moments that we become acutely aware not only of the constraints of the game but also the constraints of character. *Booker* hands over the girl and so the player, in playing as him, will necessarily hand over the girl. Hence, on a linear, narrative level the decision has already been made, and the 'gameplay' only serves as a reinforcement of that; no doubt a major contribution to the fatalism of the sequence leading up to Booker's death.

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[36] A distinction developed from Melissa Somerdin's discussion of the player and 'the avatar' in 'The Game Debate: Video Games as Innovative Storytelling', *Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*, 18.1 (2016), 69-82 (p. 73).

[37] Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 189.

What does this instance mean for us? What does it mean for the novel? An argument I wish to propose is that the novel and the videogame, ultimately, go about very different methods of establishing 'intimacy' between the player/reader and the character. There is perhaps an unparalleled psychological intimacy which can be offered by the novel and the written medium (to read, if not inhabit, another's thoughts or steam of consciousness), and a different kind of inhabiting, provided by the videogame, which offers the character as an avatar for us to control. Both, in a sense, can prove misleading: the character whose thoughts seem open to us may yet conceal, if they choose, certain thoughts or details from their narration, and otherwise they may still respond in ways we had not hoped or anticipated; and equally the character we can quite literally control, within a game, can still force us to make decisions we would not otherwise make. We cannot help David's self-destructiveness yet we will follow it, and we cannot exert any influence over Booker's life significant enough to, say, avoid selling his daughter or avert his death. There are, in other words, choices to be made which are not our own, with the characters acting as distinct entities with their own priorities and sense of agency, in spite of any sense of intimacy or techniques in point of view. In the videogame this can find expression in the conspicuous absence of choice (the way in which an interactive medium can become constrictive at the developer's will), and in the LGBT novel in the choices, disastrous or otherwise, which develop out of narratives of identify formation.

The 'moments of potential' available within these narratives can prove to be 'nodes' in the sense developed by Christoph Bode and Rainer Dietrich, as 'situation[s] that [allow] for more than one continuation', points of key narrative importance in which options become readily apparent.[38] These are the moments often tinged with a more mature, adult awareness of the feasibility of certain courses of action. For *Maurice*, one of the most significant moments of this comes in Maurice and Alec's encounter in the British Museum. It is described for Maurice as 'the most dangerous day of his

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[38] Christoph Bode and Rainer Dietrich, *Future Narratives: Theory, Poetics, and Media-Historical Moment* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), p. vii.

life',[39] and yet it is one he is not merely a subject to but a participant in, directing with his words and actions:

> He was not supported by pride but he did feel fit, anxious to play the game, and, as an Englishman should, hoped that his opponent felt fit too. He wanted to be decent, he wasn't afraid. When he saw Alec's face glowing through the dirty air his own tingled slightly, and he determined not to strike until he was struck.[40]

'[T]he game' is surely different to the one previously described in *Maurice*; this is a far more tangible, specific game if it can be considered one. 'Game', 'fit', 'opponent': a sporting diction, but tempered by a notion of 'decen[cy]' and behaving 'as an Englishman should'. It is strange, perhaps, that 'Englishman', thus far having been treated as antithetical to that 'unspeakable vice of the Greeks', is here reinvoked for a scandalous game concerning blackmail and homosexuality.[41] There are certain 'rules' implicit, even in a game as unprecedented and consequential as this; reminiscent, perhaps, of the heavy allegorical import of their earlier game of cricket (a queered austere Englishness; of them 'against the whole world').[42] The ensuing back and forth between the two has a counterbalancing rhythm: 'as he grew calm the other grew fierce', the possibility entertained, dismissed, and then further entertained that this will end in disaster.[43] It is unclear what sort of person Alec will prove to be, and hence equally unclear as to what sort of outcome is likely from such an encounter. Ultimately, openness wins through in a way it doesn't in Giovanni and David's final encounter; tense as the moment is, the two are afforded some time and space to voice their grievances, their concerns, and even their apologies (following through on the whole course of an argument). In answer to Alec's frustrations, Maurice can simply answer, 'Muddle', 'I'm always in a muddle', presumably when it comes to matters of sexuality.[44] The two are able to share a physical reconciliation by the end,

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[39] *Maurice*, p. 196.
[40] *Maurice*, p. 196.
[41] *Maurice*, p. 42.
[42] *Maurice*, p. 178. See also Anthony Bateman's *Cricket, Literature and Culture: Symbolising the Nation, Destabilising Empire* (London: Routledge, 2016); esp. his coverage of cricket as one of 'a series of authentically English symbols', p. 83.
[43] *Maurice*, p. 200.
[44] *Maurice*, p. 201.

resolving their argument at least to the extent that they are willing to spend another night together. *Giovanni's Room* hardly permits such a reciprocating dynamic, the kind of dynamic which might more readily be described as a 'game'. Instead, it is an accusation on Giovanni's part and rigid defence, dismissiveness, and reticence on David's. Perhaps the most revealing confrontation the novel has to offer comes when David has already decided on leaving; there is less of the potential, less of the openness and uncertainty we find in Alec and Maurice. Not, however, that there is no uncertainty in David's mind, only that there is a refusal to let it surface:

> With my hand on the knob, I looked at him. Then I wanted to beg him to forgive me.
> But this would have been too great a confession; any yielding at that moment would
> have locked me forever in that room with him.[45]

Even here he is afraid of facing himself, of self-examination, of the very thought that his face 'showed too much'.[46] For David, perhaps, to express himself would be in itself 'a confession'. To rise to debate would be to lose, to lose to confess, and with it 'the many lies I've told, told, lived, and believed' to start unravelling.[47] As with the player's experience of *Bioshock Infinite*, the room becomes an oppressive space through which only one option or means of progress is possible. Except, for David, leaving isn't truthfully the only option: even as the hand lingers on the doorknob the potential is there, if he would allow it, for a future they might both be happy with.

It is the kind of discussion, for example, which is not afforded in Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948).[48] By the time Jim and Bob reunite at the end of the novel there is no longer room for discussion: Bob is both a husband and a father, far from the youth and freedom he once enjoyed. And Jim, having been offered and having declined relationships with Shaw, Sullivan, and Maria, is left with no other avenue. He only has Bob, and that dream of reuniting and continuing some affair he believed in must nonetheless be dismissed as an impossibility. By the time we reach the penultimate

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[45] *Giovanni's Room*, p. 339.
[46] *Giovanni's Room*, p. 339.
[47] *Giovanni's Room*, p. 223.
[48] Gore Vidal, *The City and the Pillar* (London: Abacus, 1997). First published in 1948 with significant revisions in 1965. All further references to the text will be to this 1997 edition which includes these revisions.

scene there is nothing more to be discussed, nothing more to be said, and hence, in the most catastrophic of resolutions, Jim forces one last sexual encounter with Bob instead.

It is worth, then, discussing the tenability of the options left and, more specifically, the heterosexual 'option'. It is an avenue which, largely evidenced by Jim's experiences with Maria and Collins' prostitutes, is only available to him in the sense of a lie; a lie which, as *Giovanni's Room* illustrates, is not so easy to maintain. For whatever reason, Bob (and Clive perhaps) seems to achieve what Jim, David, and Maurice cannot. Much, however, that they may wish or may once have wished otherwise. David insists:

> 'Yes,' I said, wearily, 'I can have a life with her.' I stood up. I was shaking. 'What kind of a life can we have in this room?—this filthy little room. What kind of life can two men have together, anyway?'[49]

It is similar, perhaps, to Maurice's temporary claim to having a girlfriend or to Alec's 'brag' that 'I could marry tomorrow if I like'.[50] The suggestion is that a normative, heterosexual life is simply and always an option for them. It carries the suggestion, also, that their capacity for heterosexuality is unaffected by their homosexual behaviour or tendencies; that their homosexuality and its expression is under their control. It is a side to LGBT identity formation which has had somewhat of a troubled existence in interactive mediums. The option for Commander Shepard in the *Mass Effect* series, in the player's character in some of the *Fallout* and *Elder Scrolls* games, to simply choose between a same-sex and an opposite-sex partner, is at once an expression of a certain liberality or freedom offered by games, and at the same time an avoidance of the more fixed, unalterable sexuality we find in many of these novels. It is understandable that the player's character, particularly in very choice-driven games, should not be restricted to a single type of sexuality, and yet it is also regrettable that it sidesteps one of the most challenging parts of an identity formation narrative: coming to terms with the absence of choice in sexual attraction. For our purposes, *Life is Strange* is a fascinating example: if we refer back to our earlier character/avatar distinction, how far is Max a character with a predefined bisexuality,

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[49] *Giovanni's Room*, p. 337.
[50] *Maurice*, p. 154; p. 197.

capable of either a relationship with Warren or Chloe, and how far is Max in fact an avatar, being as straight or as homosexual as the player decides? In turn, this single dynamic changes the way sexuality is being presented in the game: as something set and established, able to be explored in either direction, or as something fluid, subject entirely to the individual's choice. While I would not wish to claim one of these is necessarily more 'realistic' than the other, we can certainly see in the protagonists of our three novels that their sexual orientation is far less malleable and negotiable than they may well have hoped; the promise of a heterosexual existence is far more illusory than desired. Perhaps the conventional linearity of the novel is conducive to the definition of a character's sexual orientation while the videogame, on occasion, has incorporated choice into the construction of a character's sexuality. As far as *Maurice* is concerned, it should come as little surprise that Mr Ducie's heterosexual ideal has been unattained by his pupil by the time they meet again; under one of these models, the heterosexual ideal was never tenable, never really an option for Maurice to truthfully pursue.

Let us now think about endings more concertedly. Specifically, let us consider them in the light of David's troubling, unanswered question: *What kind of life can two men have together, anyway?* It is a difficult question to answer; one which depends on an innumerable number of factors, not least depending on the legal implications of their given historical and social contexts. In fact, it is such a difficult question to answer for its time that not even *Maurice*, the closest of the three novels which comes to answering it, manages to. Instead the vision is hazy, kept from being fully realised for us. As E.M. Forster writes:

> I was determined that in fiction anyway two men should fall in love and remain in it
>
> for the ever and ever that fiction allows, and in this sense Maurice and Alec still roam
>
> the greenwood.[51]

The ending of *Maurice* was of particular importance to Forster, wherein the 'happy ending' of a homosexual narrative arc, and indeed a homosexual couple, serves as a political act. It is a rejection of a heterosexual or heterosexually-upholding formula of narrative; one instead where, audaciously, 'the

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[51] E.M. Forster, 'Terminal Note', in *Maurice*, pp. 219-24 (p. 220).

lovers get away unpunished and consequently recommend crime'.[52] There is no noose, no guillotine in the room ahead, neither rape nor murder; the ending itself 'condones' them and, by extension, their subversive choice. But there is of course a catch: *in fiction*, at least, this should happen, in 'the ever and ever that *fiction* allows'. Even in the provision of such an ending there is an inability to fully conceive it, to subscribe to it as a feasible, let alone realistic option for the same-sex couple in their time. '[T]o a Happier Year', the novel is dedicated, perhaps a year where such an ending could be entertained under less 'fictional' circumstances.[53] As it stands, Maurice and Alec not only survive 'in fiction' but in suspension: that fairy-tale-like 'ever and ever', 'still roam[ing] the greenwood', just as we left them. A beyond hardly seems to have been conceived, a future at all which might answer the question as to what kind of life two men can have together. To have gone any further, to have attempted to show how such a relationship could be sustained in their society, would have been to go so far as to not only risk a blatant lack of realism, but to have undermined the ideal in doing so.

This idea of 'suspension' should be investigated further. I have previously hinted at the ending of *Life is Strange*, but I have not disclosed the full significance of the final decision offered to the player. In the very first moment of the game, before Max has (presumably) even used her powers, she has her first vision of a storm destroying her town. By the end, that storm has arrived, irrespective of the player's choices. The storm seems inevitable, an inadvertent consequence of Max's powers, and yet the player is offered one last choice, the latter option encouraged by Chloe herself: to tear up the photograph which might allow you to go back in time, to finally refuse to interfere with destiny, letting the town be destroyed, or to go back in time, relive the first moment Max used her powers, and choose not to interfere instead. The game offers its own labels for these two choices: 'Sacrifice Chloe' or 'Sacrifice Arcadia Bay'. The orientation is of course on loss, on giving up rather than necessarily 'saving'. It is one of the few moments offered by the game where neither choice is desirable; the player must take a loss. The full complexity of this choice cannot simply be considered a matter of selfless utilitarianism versus selfish emotional attachment. The game offers far too many complicating factors for either choice to be especially clear, and, hence, the final episode's appropriate name

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[52] E.M. Forster, 'Terminal Note', p. 220.
[53] *Maurice*, p. 2.

'Polarised', having a near 50:50 split in terms of player choice.[54] There are two things I wish to pick out of this: the first is how this moment combines both choice and fatalism in a single moment. One of the reasons the ending choice is so significant is in the way it can redefine the entire experience, determining the moral the player might take away from the story. We can stand by and allow the storm to do what has been foretold from the beginning, to accept this as inevitability, or we can go back in time, allow Chloe to die by not interfering, and accept her death, instead, as inevitability. The choice allows the player to decide what the story was all about: an inevitable storm or an inevitable death; a power that should never have been used or a power which, despite its capacity for good, cannot be used to change everything. Perhaps this hearkens back to that postmodern ideal, as one of the truest expressions of that 'active construction' of meaning on behalf of the reader/player. Regardless of whether or not we subscribe to this, the fact this choice exists at all, and that neither outcome is more canonical or condoned than the other, means that Chloe's fate, as with that of the town's, is left in a state of suspension (the second point I wanted to pick out of this moment). Hence, despite the undeniable difference between their respective mediums, perhaps this is not such a far cry from Maurice and Alec still roaming the greenwood, living out a boundless and imaginary 'ever and ever', or from a Giovanni awaiting and approaching (in David's imagining) the guillotine, never quite getting the tangible finality of an account which says, in plain terms, 'Giovanni is dead'. And I should add that although Chloe and Max accompany each other if the town is destroyed, their kiss is only shared (and hence their potential relationship most foregrounded) when the player chooses to sacrifice her. It is a troubling existence, then, that these narratives have with their endings: too hazy, too fluid, or too uncertain to fully realise themselves.

In their own ways, both videogames and the 20th Century LGBT novel find 'non-normative' ways of conducting their endings: the endings which neither fully reassure nor condemn. In the course of this, I hope to have given some indication of the ways in which we may find overlap in the preoccupations of the LGBT novel's 'identity formation' and in the 'interactivity' (whether afforded choice or not) of recent narrative-oriented videogames. Even though the 'space' of the two mediums

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[54] Player choice statistics supplied within the game after completion. As of the 7th September, 2018: 48% chose to save Chloe while 52% chose to save the town.

is evidently different, they are both, in their own and sometimes similar ways, interrogating the meaning of the terms we use to understand narrative: choice, agency, and endings among these. Some of the most remarkable moments of videogame storytelling, 'interactive' as the medium may pride itself on being, can come just as easily from the choice-oriented experience of *Life is Strange* as it can from *Bioshock Infinite*'s more linear, conventional, deterministic method of storytelling. Despite the utopian view, there is not always choice in a videogame, nor does there need to be, and choice can be strategically stripped from the player for particular moments and narrative effects. Sometimes, as has previously been suggested for both the videogame and the LGBT novel, the choices are simply not ours to make.

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