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Permalife: Video games and the queerness of living

ABSTRACT

The mechanic of 'permadeath' has recently garnered increased interest among video game players, designers and scholars. Yet it is equally critical, in talking about death in video games, to talk about life. Just as every video game system-ises dying, it also systemises living. The social meaning contained within these systems can be termed the biopolitics and necropolitics of video games. Indeed, the renaissance of permadeath is occurring alongside the emergence of a second mechanic: permalife. In contrast to permadeath games, where players can die only once, permalife games make it impossible for players to die. While there are many video games that lack an official death state, permalife games set themselves apart by making the inability to die a central theme and/or core gameplay mechanic. In contrast to permadeath games, permalife games are primarily being designed by LGBTQ indie game-makers. It is no coincidence that queer designers are exploring biopolitical game systems structured around permalife. For queer subjects today, and particularly those operating within the reactionary vitriol of games culture, permanent living represents a particularly potent trope for expressing both hopes and concerns about existence in the face of an uncertain future. To demonstrate the varied expressions and meanings of permalife mechanics, this article looks at three works from the contemporary queer games avant-garde: Dietrich 'Squinky' Squinkifer's Quing's Quest VII: The Death of Videogames! *(2014), Mattie Brice's* Mainichi *(2012) and Anna Anthropy's* Queers in Love at the End of the World *(2013). Together, these games demonstrate how permalife operates in a space of contradiction – between life and death, futurity and stagnation, optimism*

and resistance – that reflects the complexities and challenges of real LGBTQ lives. In this way, permalife creates space for alternative modes of living in video games, challenging teleological narratives of temporal and affective progress as articulated by queer theorists like Elizabeth Freeman and Sara Ahmed. Permalife, as seen through queer games, also stands as a challenge to look to interactive systems and not just character representation as important sites of identity, desire and political meaning in video games.

The mechanic of 'permadeath' has recently garnered increased interest among video game players, designers and scholars. In contrast to games that give players multiple lives, allowing them to die and restart mid-game without losing their progress, permadeath games permit the player to die only once. The renewed popularity of permadeath (which originally emerged as a matter of technical necessity in games that did not have the computational memory to store saved files) draws attention to crucial, broader questions about the systems through which video games structure both dying and living – as well as the often implicit, yet nonetheless powerful meanings that those systems communicate. Contemporary discussions of permadeath commonly focus on death itself, underscoring the consequences and therefore the importance of dying. Yet it is equally critical, in talking about death in video games, to talk about life. Just as every video game systemises dying, it also systemises living. As Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum have compellingly argued, all game mechanics communicate values, even those that are not intended to contain social meaning (2014: 2). This is especially true of the ways that a video game structures interactive experiences of life and death. The social meaning contained within these systems, whether they are found in a single game, a game genre, or the medium more widely, can be termed the biopolitics and necropolitics of video games. While permadeath brings dying and living to the fore, all video games in fact construct and communicate their own biopolitical and necropolitical systems.

Indeed, just as biopolitics and necropolitics go hand in hand, the renaissance of permadeath is occurring alongside the emergence of a second mechanic: what I am terming perma*life*. In contrast to permadeath video games, where players can die only once, permalife games make it impossible for players to die. Instead, in such games, players are forced to go on living indefinitely – even, or perhaps especially, in the face of death. While there are many video games that lack an official death or lose state, such as games driven by narrative and exploration like *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013) or *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012), permalife games set themselves apart by making the inability to die a central theme and/or core gameplay mechanic. Contemporary permadeath games have largely been produced by 'indie' game developers whose work is in some sense experimental, yet caters to a mainstream gamer audience – a critique that has been levelled against the straight, male-dominated indie game scene by scholars and commentators like Brendan Keogh, among others (2015: 152). Permadeath itself is generally associated with the heteronormative, masculine 'hardcore'. By contrast, permalife games, for reasons I will explain below, are primarily being designed by a different type of independent developer: LGBTQ game-makers who are building small-scale, zine-like video games that directly address queer experiences and perspectives. It is no coincidence that permalife games, as opposed

to permadeath ones, are being designed by queer game-makers. For queer subjects today, and particularly those operating within the reactionary vitriol of games culture (Cross 2017: 179), permanent living represents a particularly potent trope for expressing both hopes and concerns about contemporary queer life in the face of an uncertain future.

To demonstrate how queer experiences of living and dying are communicated through permalife in video games, this article looks at three works from what I call the queer games avant-garde. The queer games avant-garde is a contemporary network of queer game-makers with its origins in North American alternative game-making scenes, but which is beginning to broaden to parts of Europe and hopefully to new national and cultural contexts in the years to come. Each of these games offers its own interactive vision of permalife and its possible meanings, both political and personal. The first of these games, Dietrich 'Squinky' Squinkifer's *Quing's Quest VII: The Death of Videogames!* (2014), tells the story of how a gender non-binary member of space royalty must destroy the toxic planet Videogames so that the medium can be reborn under the sign of social justice. In Mattie Brice's *Mainichi* (2012), the second of these games, the player loops again and again through a day in the life of a trans woman of colour, moving indefinitely through the repetitive oppressions of existence as a marginalised queer subject. Lastly, in Anna Anthropy's *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (2013), permalife explicitly intersects with and disrupts permadeath, as players live and relive the last ten seconds before the apocalypse.

It is tempting, in the context of 'diversity', to read the presence of permalife in these queer video games as uplifting. Yet, as will quickly become apparent, what it means to go on living in these games is far messier and less utopian than it may at first appear. The futurity found in this work is, in turns, exuberant, weary, mournful and defiant. In contrast to the neo-liberal, homonormative narrative of LGBTQ lives and histories 'getting better' (Goltz 2013: 135), permalife suggests alternative models for queer ways of living that persist in time: loops, endless flat lines, a constant entanglement with death (which, in these games, is always intimately entwined with life). Here, much like the socially imposed compulsion towards happiness described by queer affect scholar Sara Ahmed (2010: 2), a compulsion towards living can become as oppressive as a compulsion towards death. In this way, permalife functions as a tool for communicating and reflecting on the real, lived experiences of queer subjects. It also shifts the political implications of living within video games and pushes us to think more broadly about how in-game biopolitical systems can reflect identities and desires, which can be located as meaningfully in the structures of a video game as in the characters or storylines it represents. Approaching video games through their biopolitics highlights the design of power and possibilities for resistance by identifying the counter-hegemonic potential of gameplay itself. It also challenges us to look for the consequences of living in video games as well as the consequences of dying, to think about existing and not just surviving as difficult, and to identify places where life and not death is what gives video games meaning.

BIOPOLITICS, NECROPOLITICS AND QUEERNESS IN VIDEO GAMES

The terms biopolitics and necropolitics describe how state apparatuses and other hegemonic systems dictate who will live, who will die, and under what conditions. Michel Foucault explains biopolitics as a 'technology of power'

that serves to regulate society on a wide-reaching scale by controlling factors related to human biology and health (1997: 242). Gender and sexuality are often central to biopolitics. In the twenty-first-century context, for instance, debates around access to birth control and safe abortions, as well as access to public restrooms for transgender people, are two examples of pressing contemporary issues that are not just political but biopolitical (Lambda Legal 2015). Achille Mbembe coined the term necropolitics to highlight, building from Foucault, how state power controls death as well as life. Asks Mbembe, '[When] is the right to kill, to allow to live, or to expose to death exercised?' (2003: 12). To become a sovereign subject, according to Mbembe, the individual must confront death. In this way, necropolitics describe both the systems of power that structure the societal mechanisms of illness, death, execution, and so on as well as the modes through which a person achieves their own sovereignty through the political right to death.

Biopolitics and necropolitics are most commonly discussed from the perspectives of political science and history. However these terms can also be used to describe living and dying as they are found in video games – where the game functions like a state power, with its own systematized conditions for determining which players live, which players die, when and why. Amanda Phillips has called this the 'mechropolitics' of video games, a term that names 'a way of thinking about political death worlds as they operate in the mechanics of video games' (2015: 1). All video games have their own biopolitical and necropolitical systems, though some mechanized elements of those systems can be found widely across games. Health bars, for instance, which measure how close the player-character is to 'full life' or to death, are an example of a widely used structural element of a biopolitical in-game system. A game's necropolitical system can be understood as the specific logics that determine what will or will not hurt or kill the player-character. For instance, in some games, a player-character who falls from a high platform will die instantly or take damage, whereas in other games that character will emerge from the fall unharmed – or perhaps be restricted from walking off the ledge entirely. This is an example of a necropolitical structure, one that determines the conditions of death. Video games themselves are, to use Foucault's phrase, a technology of power. Within the individual worlds of gameplay they offer, they carefully regulate, among many other things, the mechanisms of living and dying.

The way that a video game structures life and death matters. Those structures affect the experience of gameplay, but they also communicate social meaning that extends beyond the game. This is what makes biopolitics and necropolitics in video games *political*, even when a game may not initially seem to be addressing real-world social issues. Yet, precisely because biopolitics and necropolitics are so pervasive in video games (indeed, no video game could exist without them), they often remain invisible. Many video games are both designed and played according to presumptions about how life and death should be mechanized. Rarely interrogated or challenged, these logics about living and dying in video games stand in complicated relation to the biopolitical systems that exist outside the game. Consider the trope of extra lives, which is common in arcade and early console games. As a traditional game mechanic, the use of extra lives has become so standard as to be seemingly unremarkable – yet, considered outside the context of video games where health care practices are often described as extending a single life-span rather than adding new 'lives', having, gaining, and losing extra lives would represent a far less normative structure through which to conceptualize

life. Looking to permadeath and permalife as necropolitical and biopolitical systems is valuable for interrogating the underlying structural logics of life and death in games, even when those structural logics reveal themselves to be complex and contradictory.

Permalife, as a biopolitical system, has particular resonance for queer subjects, and is therefore a fitting tool for queer game-makers seeking to enact social critique. At the most basic level, the mechanic of permalife could be seen as a powerful refusal of death – a symbolic performance of the will to live in the face of homophobic oppression and violence. Within the context of video games, permalife could also be read as a rebuttal, through design, to the masculinist 'hardcore-ness' of permadeath. In this interpretation, permalife could be understood as the absence of death, wherein death represents heteronormativity in video games and the marginalization of non-straight, non-male, non-cis players in games culture. However, while the presence of permalife in the games considered here does contain an element of this refusal of the gendered status quo, it would be incorrect to say that permalife games contain no death – that is, that they contain only biopolitics and no necropolitics. To the contrary, as we will see in the games analysed below, permalife is a mechanic that stands at the very intersection of biopolitics and necropolitics, demonstrating how social meaning exists precisely in the frictions between living and dying. It is for this reason that permalife serves as a meaningful system through which to communicate the experiences of contemporary queer subjects, for whom danger at both a personal and cultural level always exists as a backdrop to the daily drive to go on living. Though this drive structures all three of the games considered below, it manifests differently in each. Whether through a message about a continual future, or a representation of a day-to-day life that must go on forever, or an apocalypse that repeats again and again, these games suggest a fundamental link between permalife and queerness, as well as a core connection between living 'differently' and being queer within games.

Quing's Quest: *The death and rebirth of video games*

Dietrich 'Squinky' Squinkifer's 2014 *Quing's Quest VII: The Death of Videogames!* is a text-based Twine game that takes place on a space ship fleeing the planet Videogames. It features a gender non-binary protagonist, a space captain descended from royalty who flies the spacecraft the Social Justice Warrior. After the invasion of Videogames by the Misogynerds, the player-character and their trusty first-mate are driven from the planet by the Gamer Police. Despite their efforts to evade capture, the Social Justice Warrior is boarded by these pursuers, who arrest the captain for 'insubordination, espionage, failing to conform to gender norms, [and] snogging the wrong kinds of people'. The captain fights back by dancing. One by one, the police explode into bursts of glitter. In the game's final moments, with the coast clear and the fate of Videogames still hanging in the balance, the player is faced with a decision. 'What are you going to do next?', asks the first mate. The following options appear on-screen: 'Save Videogames', 'Destroy Videogames' or 'Get the hell away from Videogames'. Players who choose 'Save Videogames' are told there is nothing left to save, and that the Videogames must either be destroyed or left to destroy itself. Choosing to destroy Videogames makes the planet explode 'into a glittery supernova'. And yet, even in this moment of destruction, the game tells players, 'you can see the beginnings of a new

planet forming […] You see what it might become one day […] All you have to do now is build it'.

In *Quing's Quest*, permalife takes the form of a cyclical narrative – the tale of a world that must be destroyed, but which is simultaneously reborn. Despite the game's sobering subject matter (the invasion of an artistic medium by misogynists), its tone is bright and exuberant. On-screen text selection options shimmer, echoing the explosions of sparkles that defeat the Gamer Police and ultimately eradicate the planet Videogames itself. Upbeat music plays in the background, and the game revels in including enjoyable, playful details, like extensive wardrobe options for the player-character. In this way, life – or, perhaps more accurately, liveliness – persists throughout the game, both in the story of the planet that is always already reforming, and in the game's aesthetics, which are vibrant and alive in ways that simplify and yet recall the shimmering complexities of actual queer lives. *Quing's Quest* was created as part of the 2014 Ruin Jam (Squinkifer, 2014), an event organized in response to the harassment campaign #GamerGate, members of which were accusing women, people of colour, and queer people who work in video games of 'ruining the medium' with their focus on identity and social justice. Squinky's work therefore directly relates the in-game politics of life and death to the politics of video games themselves and the place of queer subjects within them. The planet Videogames, beset by Misogynerds, is clearly the medium of video games itself, which Squinky, as a queer game-maker, must destroy so that it can be born again under the sign of inclusion rather than discrimination. The permalife of *Quing's Quest* is a statement of resistance: video games will go on living, even after the toxic elements of video game culture have been eradicated.

On the one hand, the biopolitics of *Quing's Quest* offer something like hope – the suggestion that a better future for video games, 'a place of acceptance and abundance and freedom and justice and love and happiness', can rise from the ashes of the very death of video games promised by the game's title. At the same time, the vision of permalife that Squinky's game offers complicates this narrative of progress. Dying is just as persistent as living in *Quing's Quest*, demonstrating how permalife is an expression of necropolitics as much as the politics of living. In order for the planet Videogames to be reborn time and again, in each subsequent play-through, it must be destroyed – leaving the queer utopian future of sociality to remain perpetually, in the words of José Esteban Muñoz, 'not yet here' (2009: 1). In this way, the biopolitics of *Quing's Quest* walk a line between death and life that reflects the precarious position of queer subjects within video games and the world beyond. Yet the persistent presence of death in Squinky's permalife game differs in important ways from the mechanic of permadeath. Rather than attempting to avoid destruction, the player of *Quing's Quest* seeks it; death is the only way forward into renewed life. The destruction of Videogames, when it does occur, is never itself permanent, since the planet always begins to form again. Because the game suggests a cycle that will repeat endlessly into the future of the video games, this vision of permadeath counters the function of permadeath in which the player may die only once. Here, instead, the player and the entire medium die again and again as they pursue a hopeful future that is 'beautiful', to quote the captain of the Social Justice Warrior, and yet which never quite arrives, sitting permanently on life's horizon.

The ambiguity of hope in *Quing's Quest* also relates to the game's engagement with toxic games culture. In *Quing's Quest*, permalife and games culture

seem to stand in contradictory relation to one another, illustrating how permalife as a mechanic frequently encompasses seemingly oppositional meanings. As mentioned, the permalife found in the game seems hopeful. It offers a vision of a future in which video games culture, with its vitriolic attacks on social justice, has died away, leaving those who have been marginalized to live on and remake the world of games. However, behind this optimistic interpretation of the game lies an implicit association of permalife with the very sort of toxic games culture that *Quing's Quest* seems to 'explode'. Homophobia, sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination are the forces of oppression in video games that will not die, so to speak. They have been notable presences in games culture since the release of the first commercial video games in the 1970s, and today they seem more alive than ever (Heir 2014). Thus, contained within this optimistic vision of video games' rebirth is an echo of the threat that permalife itself might pose: the inability to kill that which keeps returning. To let oneself believe in this future, in which video games are remade by those people who have been so long oppressed, also entails a longing intimately connected to death – the longing to see oppression die, and to see it die permanently. The subtitle of Squinky's game, 'The Death of Videogames!', not only foregrounds death; it also celebrates it. Permalife, granted to those who are currently seen as 'different' in games, goes hand in hand with the annihilation of the hegemonic mainstream. To function, permalife requires permadeath – or, perhaps more accurately, a permanent dance between life and death in which the possibility of destruction is always inherent in the ongoing experience of (queer) living.

Mainichi: *Queer life that goes on living*

Mattie Brice's *Mainichi* (2012) is also a queer permalife video game, but one that offers a very different thematic and structural vision of what it means to keep on living. *Mainichi* is a top-down, 2D role-playing game. Players take on the role of Mattie, a trans woman of colour, as she gets ready to head out to meet a friend for coffee, then walks to the coffee shop and talks with her friend. Along the way, Mattie faces a number of decisions, some seemingly mundane (e.g. whether or not to take the time to put on makeup and 'look like herself') and some that explicitly relate to experiences of discrimination (e.g. walking past harassers who yell transphobic remarks on the street). Because it draws its procedural rhetoric from the RPG genre, which often involves action- and speech-option menus, *Mainichi* gives first-time players the impression that they have meaningful choices to make – that is, that by choosing what actions to do correctly, they can affect the outcome of the game. However, in reality, each play-through of *Mainichi* ends relatively the same way: with Mattie sipping coffee with her friend and expressing dissatisfaction with her life. When the player completes this sequence, the game starts again with a new day, identical to the day before it. Indeed, 'mainichi' is a Japanese word that means 'everyday'. As she has written, Brice chose this word to underscore the fact that the game depicts what her daily life is like and how the same bright moments and the same frustrations seem to repeat time and again (2012).

Whereas the permalife elements in *Quing's Quest* are largely thematic, communicated through text in the game's final narrative moments, permalife in *Mainichi* is structural. The player-character does not have to be told that the life depicted in the game will go on forever; if they continue playing, it simply

will. *Mainichi* loops. It is impossible to win at the game, but it is also impossible to die. Biopolitics are constantly present in *Mainichi*, yet the game has none of the common trappings of a traditional biopolitical system within a video game: no health metres, no physical conflict that threatens life and limb. Ironically, this is what makes *Mainichi* difficult. Scholars like Lisa Nakamura have reimagined the concept of the 'difficulty level' in video games as a measure of marginalization for women, queer people, and people of colour within games culture (2012). Brice's work too challenges us to rethink what difficulty means in the context of video games. When it comes to biopolitics and necropolitics, permadeath is typically the mechanic associated with difficulty in playing games. Dying permanently in a game means that finishing a game without dying requires considerable skill. Conversely, one might assume that permalife, as a mechanic, makes a video game particularly easy, because it removes the risk of death from the game. However, *Mainichi* is anything but easy, nor can the difficulty that is located in a game like this one be overcome with skill. What makes Brice's game difficult – going out into a world of marginalization day after day – is the same thing that makes living a queer life within a society that discriminates against queer people difficult. *Mainichi* is hard because existing as a queer person in an oppressive, heteronormative culture is hard.

   Mainichi is not the only video game structured around the repetitions of daily life. On the surface, Molleindustria's 2009 game *Every Day the Same Dream*, a work from a socially mainstream indie game-maker, operates on a similar premise. Again and again, players move through the same grey, joyless day in the life of a white-collar desk worker. Like in *Mainichi*, each day opens with the player-character stepping out of bed, getting dressed, and heading into the world – and also like in *Mainichi*, the game plays off traditional video game tropes to tempt the player into looking for ways that they can, in the words of critic Leigh Alexander, 'disrupt this soulless routine' (2010). Yet there are also many important differences between *Mainichi* and *Every Day the Same Dream*, not the least among them their representational politics. Molleindustria's game features a faceless, default white, male protagonist whose struggle against alienated labour is presented as implicitly universal. He has a wife (labelled with the possessive as 'my wife'), but her depiction is based on regressive gender stereotypes and her only role is as a set piece in the game's dreary background. By contrast, the story that *Mainichi* tells is explicitly about the experiences of queer, trans subjects and people of colour. It does not attempt to speak to a universal feeling, but rather expresses the perspective of a marginalized person – the same sort of marginalized person whose perspective is left out of Molleindustria's representation of gainfully employed if emotionally unsatisfied desk workers. As in Amber Hollibaugh and Margot Weiss' formulation of 'queer precarity', socio-economics are inextricable from the biopolitical conditions of queer subjecthood (2015: 18). Held in juxtaposition to *Every Day the Same Dream*, the politics of *Mainichi* as a game about lived queer experience become all the clearer and all the more important in the still largely heteronormative landscape of indie games.

   This comparison between *Mainichi* and *Every Day the Same Dream* is also helpful for bringing into focus the meanings behind the permalife mechanics that Brice implements. At first glance, it may seem that *Every Day the Same Dream* could also be described as a permalife game. Media studies scholar Braxton Soderman has written about the importance of repetition and loops in the game, as well as a sense of déjà vu (2010). As the player plays and replays

the same day to figure out what changes they can make to their routine, it does seem that the game could go on forever. However, unlike *Mainichi*, Molleindustria's game has an end-state – i.e. a way to finish and/or win the game, by figuring out all its variations – and players can change their future by taking different paths (coming to work without clothes on, for example). The ability to create lasting change, to enact agency and ultimately bring about an ending, runs counter to the essence of permalife, which goes on living regardless of the player's actions. If we think back to the final moments of *Quing's Quest*, this is true of Squinky's game as well; players are initially given the choice of whether to save or destroy video games, but soon learn that in fact there is only one decision they can make in order to proceed. In this sense, permalife is a type of biopolitics in which life does not necessarily equate to empowerment, and the persistence of living can be more oppressive than death. *Mainichi*, in contrast to *Every Day the Same Dream*, exemplifies this idea. Because there is no way to complete *Mainichi*, the 'everyday' of Brice's piece does not come to a halt when the game is completed. This is because *Mainichi* is not first and foremost a video game, but a reflection of a real, queer life.

At the heart of *Mainichi*'s vision of permalife lies a contradiction that relates to the precarity of queer existence. The fact that the game offers players no way to die or to lose is, on the one hand, a powerful statement expressed through the gameplay system. As a trans woman of colour, the character Mattie calls to mind the many real-life trans women of colour who face brutal violence in the world outside of video games (Cifredo 2016). Even in the face of harassment and oppression, the Mattie character cannot be killed; her repeating, everyday loop becomes a space of queer world-building where violence against trans women found outside the game cannot reach her or end her life. At the same time, to say that *Mainichi* is structured around a biopolitical system without violence would be incorrect. The violence found in Brice's game is emotional and interpersonal. What is more, the threat of physical violence makes itself felt as a permanent fixture in the game, as when the player-character is harassed on the street. This threat lingers, suggesting that even permalife is, for queer subjects, always precarious. Indeed, a number of Brice's other projects, such as her game *Eat* (2013), similarly explore the thin line between life and death for socio-economically disadvantaged queer people and people of colour (2013). In this way, Brice's implementation of permalife mechanics offers a political and personal statement by making the life that goes on living often tedious, uncomfortable, and always implicitly at risk.

Queers in Love at the End of the World: *Intimacy as persistence*

In Anna Anthropy's *Queers in Love at the End of the World*, the world is always ending. The game opens on a scene of two lovers embracing in the face of the imminent apocalypse: kissing, caressing, holding onto one another fiercely. 'In the end, like you always said, it's just the two of you together', reads the game's opening line. From here, the player must decide which actions to take with the lover, what to tell her, and how to experience the final moments of time. A visually simple Twine game, what makes *Queers in Love* formalistically unique is its timer. Each time the player restarts the game, a clock in the upper left-hand side of the screen counts down ten seconds. No matter how far the player has progressed through their branching interactions with the lover in those seconds, the game comes to an end and the screen reads, 'Everything

is wiped away'. From this screen, the player can choose to restart, attempting different routes or deeper inroads into their engagement with the lover – or they can choose the 'afterward', which brings up a dripping, graffiti-esque image that reads, '[w]hen we have each other we have everything'. Even this afterward is not really the final word, however, as Claudia Lo notes in her article on Anthropy's game 'Everything is wiped away: Queer temporality and the death drive in *Queers in Love at the End of the World*' (Lo forthcoming). Once again, at the bottom of the screen, the game prompts the player to restart, and the ten-second countdown to the end of the world begins again.

Queers in Love is a permalife game. At first glance, this description may seem counterintuitive, since Anthropy's game is explicitly about death on a massive scale – the very end of the world. It is true that absolute destruction, and what queer intimacy might mean in the face of that destruction, is a core question in the game. For that reason, one might be tempted to label it a permadeath game, since dying is an ongoing presence and central to the experience the game seeks to convey. Yet many features of *Queers in Love* makes the game and its biopolitical implications a far better fit for the permalife model. As in both *Quing's Quest* and *Mainichi*, the game loops back on itself, creating the opportunity for infinite play. Though a player could theoretically play *Queers in Love* only once, the game is intentionally structured around this kind of looping replay, making the repetitive cycles of death and life fundamentally different from the traditional 'extra lives' model, which prompts players to continue along a linear path of progress. In this way, the game offers a persistent space of living, albeit living that is always mere seconds away from dying. Of the three games considered here, *Queers in Love* most directly engages with permalife as a structured gameplay mechanic. In this game, permalife is not just a theme (as in *Quing's Quest*) or a structural feature (as in *Mainichi*), but rather the key site of play. As they race to explore their connection with the lover in individual, repeating ten second bursts, the player plays and replays, enacting their intimacy in as many different ways as possible before the world ends. In doing so, players both attempt to thoroughly explore the encounter with the lover and see if it is possible to change the outcome of the apocalypse by finding the right meeting of queer bodies. The answer is no, the world cannot be saved, but two queer lovers with their limbs entwined can watch its end together.

The permanence of permalife in Anthropy's game is about more than the fact that the player can keep on playing. There is also a permanence, or perhaps more aptly a persistence, that can be traced across multiple play-throughs of the game, i.e. multiple cycles of life and death. This persistence can be found in the body of the lover, and even more specifically in the player's intimate contact with that body. 'You have ten seconds, but there's so much you want to do', reads the opening screen. 'Kiss her, hold her, take her hand, tell her'. With only a few instants to act, the player cannot possibly do all of these things, yet the line, '[t]here's so much you want to do', suggests that the player desires to complete the interaction, to do it all. The player must play through multiple times in an attempt to achieve this goal, creating a persistent sexual experience that cuts across the multiple times the world has begun and ended. In this sense, the permanent life in the game is not the game world itself, which keeps repeating, but the bodies of the lovers within it and the interactions of the queers, who return time and again to keep touching and connecting. It is in this way that the other is knowable in *Queers in Love*. One must play again and again, returning across cycles of life, death and life once more.

The intimacy that builds through persistence is characterized by an almost frantic need to play quickly, to progress further than before in the mere ten seconds allotted. Here too is the liveliness of permalife in Anthropy's game: the compulsion forward, running through dialog and action options, speeding through the encounter from which death would be a rest or even an escape.

What ultimately is the message communicated through permalife in *Queers in Love*? This vision of permalife shows us a queer intimacy that defies normative notions of life, death, and time – an intimacy that is built across the standard boundaries of living and dying and that resonates (as I will address below) with notions of queer temporality and its meanings. The lovers must love quickly, but they can love again and again, even after the world has ended. Amidst this frenzy, the encounter between the lovers is not always tender, but often hurried and confused. Though Anthropy's game may seem like the darkest in tone of the three discussed here, it offers perhaps the most hopeful vision of queer living through a kind of queer micro-world building. In this game, the timer counts down to destruction, yet within the ten seconds allotted for life lies a world made up entirely of the queer lovers: their touch, their words, their desires. The text of the afterward also serves as a key to unlocking the meanings behind permalife in *Queers in Love*: '[w]hen we have each other we have everything'. The important word here is 'when'. Contained within the moment of having each other, of being together with the lover, is the possibility for infinite time and space. To have the other, for the queer lovers to have each other, is to have everything – to have all the time, to be permanently alive with one another. In this sense, the biopolitics of Anthropy's game are indeed fundamentally queer. They remake normative notions of what it means to be alive by suggesting a permanence of life that can exist within the shortest of queer embraces.

THE QUEER POLITICS OF PERMALIFE

From these games, permalife emerges as a queer mechanic that challenges heteronormativity through its commingled engagement with biopolitics and necropolitics. In permalife games, queerness exists on the level of interactive play, while it simultaneously resonates with the real, lived experiences of queer subjects, such as the games' designers. By inviting players to play with life and death – and to play with life queerly – these games offer their own unique political and personal visions of what life and death mean. The politics of permalife are the politics of living. At the same time, in a moment when diversity in video games is becoming a key topic in scholarly and mainstream discourse (Ruberg and Shaw 2017: xi), permalife offers an alternative vision of how games and gameplay can be tied to queer life. Permalife suggests that an engagement with queer experiences can be found in the ways that a game is designed and the structural systems it offers, as well as in its representation of LGBTQ characters and storylines.

Permalife, understood as a queer game mechanic, productively resonates with and also complicates existing work in both the field of game studies and queer studies. For instance, it brings new perspectives to the theorization of death in video games and highlights the importance of identity in relation to in-game dying. In his keynote at the *2015 Digital Games Research Association Conference*, 'Navigating uncertainty: Ludic epistemology in an age of new essentialisms', Markus Rautzenberg draws from psychoanalysis to interpret life and death in video games (2015). Rautzenberg focuses his reading on

large-scale AAA games, with their established systems for allowing players to save and respawn, and does not address small-scale, indie titles that experiment with permadeath, permalife, or other alternative models for living, like those discussed here. However, he does offer provocations that are helpful for making sense of the dialectical dance between life and death that exists at the core of permalife games. For instance, following from Jacques Lacan, he argues for a tight if seemingly paradoxical connection between death and hope, recalling the tensions between destruction and hopefulness in *Quing's Quest*. Human beings, says Rautzenberg, can never truly know death, and so, on some level, they believe themselves to be immortal. Death, in this formulation, represents the relief from an imagined eternity of suffering; a belief that one is going to die is what 'make[s] life bearable'. According to Rautzenberg, video games enact a kind of insanity by offering players the chance to die and be reborn time and again, enticing them with the uncertainty of their own precarity and yet simultaneously removing that uncertainty by rendering them functionally immortal. In permalife video games, death and hope are also closely related, and the endless process of living is likewise wearisome and often painful. However, death itself is denied to the player of a permalife game, who must find hope in the Sisyphean task of continuing to live – and continuing to play – even when queer life feels unbearable.

Yet the association that Rautzenberg draws between the biopolitical and necropolitical systems of video games and 'insanity' highlights the problematic social valences of his argument. If video games in which players die and are reborn are 'insane', then permalife games would be the most 'insane' of all, since they are fundamentally designed around infinite life. Labelling game systems in this way is, of course, ableist, discriminatory, and fundamentally misguided, even if it draws from a longer psychoanalytic tradition. As permalife games and the queer perspectives they draw from make clear, being non-normative and/or marginalized often entails inhabiting worlds where life and death operate differently than they do for the hegemonic mainstream. This does not make the biopolitical experience of permalife games less 'sane'. Rather, it demonstrates that the queer lives that these games reflect themselves challenge accepted standards for life, death, and their meaning, both in and beyond video games.

Permalife also resonates with queer theory in a number of valuable ways that could be explored at greater length. For example, permalife could fruitfully be put in dialogue with queer failure. I have written elsewhere about how concepts of queer failure, such as those put forth by Jack Halberstam (2011), can be used to reclaim alternative ways of playing video games by rejecting win-states and embracing losing (Ruberg 2017). From this perspective, permalife may seem to be the opposite of failure, the sheer inability of the player to lose. Yet permalife shares an ethos with queer failure, namely the desire to resist heteronormative notions of success – such as succeeding to change the course of a challenging day's events in *Mainichi*, or to avert the destruction of the world in *Queers in Love*. Permalife could also be read alongside concepts of queer time and space. As queer theorists like Heather Love and Elizabeth Freeman have argued, dominant social expectations dictate that acceptable (i.e. cisgender, heterosexual) subjects are supposed to live their lives along the lines of 'chrononormativity' (Love 2007; Freeman 2010). Socially acceptable lives are those that progress according to a certain timeline of events, from sexual maturity to marriage to reproduction. Video games, both as individual genres and as a medium, have their own chrononormativity. Permalife,

by contrast, does not follow this chrononormative arc. Instead, it operates in the possibility spaces of queer temporality. As the three games analysed here illustrate, permalife simultaneously stretches out the shape of queer lives like flat, endless lines into the future, looping back on themselves, stagnating and refusing to enact meaningful change. These queer movements through the timeline of life – both in terms of lived human lives and lives in video games – bring us directly back to the biopolitics and necropolitics of game play.

Though the two may seem opposites, permalife, as understood through its appearance in queer games, is not in fact the opposite of permadeath. Permalife too is 'hardcore', in that it is a difficult 'mode' of playing and of living. And like permadeath, which is often described as more realistic than other structures of dying in video games, permalife is realistic in its own way, especially for queer subjects – not because queer subjects are invulnerable, but precisely because they have been positioned permanently by the oppressions of hegemonic culture at the precarious line between life and death, always struggling forward, compelled to go on by narratives of progress. Life repeats, with its pleasures and its pains, and the queer subject keeps on living. This is the futurity, both joyful and mournful, that is envisioned through permalife in queer video games – a futurity that is messy, desolate and hopeful, a place where queer subjects lack the types of agency offered by traditional video games and social privilege alike, but where they nonetheless survive: a distinctly queer way of living.

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