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Trust, Confidence, and Hope in *A Summer's End – Hong Kong 1986*: A Reparative Reading

ABSTRACT

Building on Sedgwick's (1997) and Love's (2010) reparative reading, this paper offers an analysis of the theme of trust and its variations (reluctance, confidence, intimacy, etc.) in the visual novel *A Summer's End – Hong Kong 1986* (Oracle & Bone, 2020). More specifically, it examines how trust takes place (1) between the game characters, (2) between the player and the characters, and (3) between the queer player and the video game medium. *A Summer's End* tells the unlikely love story between Michelle Fong Ha Cheung, a disciplined office worker who lives with her mother, and Sam Ka Yan Wong, an independent and free-spirited woman who owns a video store. The story is set in Hong Kong, two years after the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed, and offers a reflection on the challenges of being a queer woman in uncertain times. The game provides an interesting case for studying trust from a humanities perspective, a theme under explored in game studies and in English-language scholarship in general.

1. INTRODUCTION

I launch *A Summer's End – Hong Kong 1986* (*ASE* hereafter; Oracle & Bone, 2020). Instantly, my body starts vibrating to the rhythm of the title screen music.¹ This music makes me euphoric, in love; it reminds me of a beating heart. I let myself be affected by it, and I wish, deep within myself, to live a love story as strong as the one it evokes. On the screen, two young women, Michelle and Sam, gaze at each other intensely (see Figure 1). They are so close to each other, but a screen seems to separate them. Looking at the image more carefully, I realize that this screen is permeable: Sam's hand manages to cross it to caress Michelle's face, while Michelle's fingers cross it, albeit more discreetly, to intertwine with Sam's fingers. Despite the obstacles, queer love seems possible.

ASE is a visual novel developed by Charissa So and Tida Kietsungden, two Vancouver-based game designers better known under the name Oracle & Bone. The game tells the unlikely love story between Michelle Fong Ha

1. I am referring here to the track "Eighties," by PengusStudio.



Figure 1: Title screen of *A Summer's End*. Screenshot from *A Summer's End* – *Hong Kong 1986*

Cheung, a disciplined office worker who lives with her mother, and Sam Ka Yan Wong, an independent and free-spirited woman who owns a video store. The story is set in Hong Kong in the summer of 1986, two years after the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed,² in the vibrant district of Mong Kok. *ASE* offers a reflection on the challenges of being a queer woman in uncertain times. More precisely, it explores themes of desire, freedom, and hope in a time and space “where Asian traditional values and Western idealism clash and converge” (Oracle & Bone, 2019, para. 2).

The game’s aesthetic is inspired by media from the 1980s, and more specifically anime, Hongkongese cinema, music videos, fashion magazines, and *manhua* (comics in the Chinese-speaking world). The designers describe the game as a “new media homage to Asian cinema and Hong Kong’s golden age of entertainment” (Oracle & Bone, n.d., section “A Summer’s End,” para. 1). These influences are noticeable in the character design, colour palette, and visual references to city pop, but also in the soundtrack, which incorporates elements of funk and Italo disco from the 1980s, and elements of synthwave, chillwave, and vaporwave, contemporary music genres that seek to evoke this period and induce nostalgia. This retro aesthetic is also noticeable in the user interface, which resembles an old television with its options menu (Figure 1), and in the game’s trailer, which evokes a music video from the 1980s with its 4:3 aspect ratio, grainy image, tracking lines, and jump cuts.

2. The Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed on December 19, 1984, and was registered with the United Nations on June 12, 1985. It stipulated that the United Kingdom would cede Hong Kong to China on July 1, 1997, and that Hong Kong would be considered a special administrative region for 50 years under the “one country, two systems” principle.

The game is composed of two-dimensional environments with static backgrounds, character sprites, text boxes, and a soundtrack. At key moments in the game, detailed images drawn specifically for the scene appear on screen and act as rewards for the player. The game also incorporates dialogue trees – a central component of text-based video games – where the game provides several options for the player to choose the responses of Michelle, the protagonist, during conversations with other characters. The game uses a point-based system, and the player's choices have consequences on the relationship between Michelle and Sam, and how the story unfolds. However, the impact of these choices is fairly small, except at one turning point in the game, which I will come back to later (these choices usually allow the player to unlock optional intimate scenes).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY: TRUST AND REPARATIVE READING

This paper offers an analysis of the theme of trust and its variations (reluctance, confidence, intimacy, etc.) in *ASE*, with a specific focus on how trust takes place (1) between the game characters, (2) between the player and the characters, (3) and between the queer player and the video game medium. Research on trust from a humanities perspective is still scarce in English-language scholarship, and for this reason, several of the key texts I am drawing from in this paper were written in French. In doing so, I wish to make accessible new resources and contribute to bridging the gap between different epistemologies. Following the work of Olivia Leboyer and Jean-Philippe Vincent (2019), my analysis starts from the premise that video games, like literature or cinema, provide an ideal opportunity to study trust – its formation and its fragility – and to broaden our knowledge on the subject. Italian philosopher Michela Marzano (2010) writes:

Strictly speaking, trust refers to the idea that one can rely on someone or on something. The verb *confier* [to entrust] (from the Latin *confidere*: *cum*, “with” and *fidere* “to rely”) means, indeed, that one gives something precious to someone, by trusting him and thus abandoning oneself to his benevolence and good faith. The etymology of the word also shows the close links that exist between trust, faith, loyalty, confidence, credit and belief. (p. 53, author's translation)

For Marzano (2010), trust is closely tied to human existence. It creates strong relationships where dependence and vulnerability meet; it changes our relationship to the world and to ourselves, and makes us realize that we are never completely independent (Marzano, 2010). Trust is in opposition with fear, and more precisely with the fear of the future, “reintroducing into the world the possibility of hope, [and] pushing everyone to bet again on oneself, on others and, more generally, on the future” (Marzano, 2010, p. 61, author's translation). For Marzano, trust ultimately allows us to change our relationship to time: it invites us to believe that “the space of possibilities is still open”

(2010, p. 60, author's translation) and to overcome obstacles rather than remain frozen in fear. Such a definition aligns well with *ASE*, which offers a reflection on trust that is deeply connected to the theme of time: to the respect of traditional values, the future handover of Hong Kong to China, and the challenges of living a queer life and imagining a queer future that is optimistic.

My analysis falls within the larger corpus of queer game studies and draws inspiration from works that have proposed a reparative reading of certain games. So far, analyses of games with LGBT+ content have mostly focused on representation (e.g., Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Shaw et al., 2019), often highlighting the presence of certain harmful tropes (e.g., Deshane & Morton, 2018; Kosciesza, 2023; Pötzsch & Waszkiewicz, 2019; Youngblood, 2018). Other works have explored how video games can challenge heteronormative values and hegemonic game culture, but these works have generally focused on game mechanics, play styles, and performance, stressing that playing queerly can be a form of resistance (e.g., Chang, 2017; Pape, 2021; Pelurson, 2018; Ruberg, 2019, pp. 133–208). Surprisingly, despite the rising number of queer analyses of specific games, only few authors have drawn on reparative reading, and when they do, they rarely mention using this style of critique (k, 2017; Phillips, 2017; Poirier-Poulin, 2022). It is almost as if the “reparative turn” Robyn Wiegman (2014) talks about in queer feminist scholarship never really made its way to game studies.

Originally theorized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1997), reparative reading is a response to paranoid reading, i.e., the type of analysis traditionally encouraged in academia. As Heather Love (2010) explains, paranoid reading encourages us to maintain a critical distance from our object of study, to seek to be right and outsmart each other, to refuse to be surprised, and to reject “the negative affect of humiliation” (Sedgwick, 1997, p. 24). Paranoid reading is “anticipatory and retroactive” (Sedgwick, 1997, p. 24) and leads us to think about the tragic past of our communities to be prepared for the tragedies to come (Love, 2010). According to Love, the paranoid person is better informed, but feels worse: they are “aggressive and wounded” (2010, p. 237) and criticize from a position of weakness. On the other hand, reparative reading is less anxiety-provoking: it puts into question a hermeneutics of hypervigilance and suspicion (Wiegman, 2014) and aims to heal the wounds caused by homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of violence rather than revealing new forms of oppression. In game studies, reparative reading has been used by Kara Stone (2018), whose work is worth quoting at length:

Reparative reading is a form of academic creation where the emphasis is on finding forms of healing and reparation rather than the seemingly endless approach of finding more things to be depressed about. I remember being an undergraduate student and being put off by queer theory's constant pointing out of homophobia and opening up of queer wounds. I understood that the world was anti-queer. Anti-me. I didn't need queer theory to tell me the advertisement on my cereal box

also wanted me dead. When I came across Sedgwick's reparative reading as a grad student, I felt suddenly engaged with queer theory again. What can academia do to heal, to comfort, and to reform dominant understandings of the world into something that enables queer people to keep living? (section "Healing Affect," para. 4)

This is not to say that paranoid reading is never necessary, but like Sedgwick (1997), I believe that reparative reading is just as valid: "no less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmatic" (p. 35). Merritt K (2017) has nicely shown how *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013), a game about queer women in love, "left [her] hopeful rather than grieving" (p. 148), while Amanda Phillips (2017) has recasted *Bayonetta* (PlatinumGames, 2009), often criticized for her sexualized design, as a queer force who "disturb[s] the narratives we tell about what it means to be a gamer, or a woman, or a slut, or a hero in contemporary time" (p. 121). In my previous work, I have argued that the visual novel *Coming Out on Top* (Obscurasoft, 2014) allows for a form of radical hope thanks to its light-hearted, erotic comedy and by "proposing a world where happiness for gay men is possible" (Poirier-Poulin, 2022, p. 284).

Reparative reading does us good, makes our readers feel good, and allows us to take care of each other. It is a compelling style of critique to analyze games that we find uplifting and that we believe might benefit other players. This is how I see *ASE*. In addition, reparative reading aligns well with the theme of trust that is at the heart of this paper, whereas paranoid reading is closer to that of distrust and suspicion. The methodology deployed in this paper is close reading, as adapted to game studies by Jim Bizzocchi and Theresa Tanenbaum (2011; see also Tanenbaum, 2015). My analysis draws largely on queer theory and affect theory, seeking to propose a queer epistemology of trust, and is informed by my own gaming experience with *ASE* as a queer player. As Sarah Stang (2022) explains, "close reading centralizes the scholar's perspective, subjectivity, and experience. . . . The closeness, intimacy, and vulnerability of close reading is what makes it particularly compelling as a method" (p. 236). While close reading often produces analyses that are rather personal, it embraces the idea that one's experience can resonate with that of others, especially when they have similar lived experiences.

3. TRUST AND RELUCTANCE

The themes of trust and reluctance are at the centre of Michelle and Sam's relationship. Michelle's life is the opposite of Sam's and comes down to work and sleep. Michelle is relatively satisfied with her life and plans to marry a suitable man and start a family. This will allow her to satisfy her conservative mother, who made several sacrifices so that she could go to university and live a rather peaceful life. Michelle's life is representative of what Sara Ahmed (2010) has called the "promise of happiness." According to Ahmed (2006), our lives are

oriented toward what was given to us, toward the family line, pushing us to take people from the opposite sex as “love objects” (p. 85). For a life to count as a “good life,” it must be treated as a common good, and one must achieve certain heteronormative milestones at different stages of their life (getting married, having children, and so on) to repay their debt to their parents (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 21, 85–86). Happiness is only promised to those who orient themselves toward certain values, lifestyles, and heteronormative aspirations, and a queer life is perceived as sad, strange, and without a purpose (Ahmed, 2010).

Meeting Sam upsets Michelle’s plans. Little by little, Michelle begins to lean on Sam, who is much more comfortable with her sexuality and her desires than she is. Michelle accepts Sam’s invitation to the restaurant, goes to the bar Ruby with her, and eventually accompanies her to Sai Kung by scooter. Michelle is initially reluctant to accept each of these invitations – trust must constantly be renegotiated and shared – but her fascination for Sam pushes her to keep seeing her. Ahmed (2004/2014) nicely describes this feeling: “Queer feelings may embrace a sense of discomfort, a lack of ease with the available scripts for living and loving, along with an excitement in the face of the uncertainty of where the discomfort may take us” (p. 155). The scooter ride in *ASE* is highly symbolic: Michelle sits at the back and accepts that Sam is completely in control during the ride, but she is a little frightened and finds that Sam drives too fast – like in her relationship with Michelle, Sam is going too fast. After getting on Sam’s scooter, Michelle tells the player: “Somehow, I had let myself get caught up in her pace again.” In addition, despite the presence of dialogue trees throughout the game, the game is very linear, and the player has little control over the course of the story; the player themselves must accept to be brought along by Sam and by the game narrative.

This feeling of trust in Sam (both on Michelle and the player’s part) is related to what she inspires – she is cheerful and confident, and kindly flirts with Michelle – but also to the game’s affective environment, which favours intimacy and bonding. Michelle and Sam repeatedly wander in the busy streets of Mong Kok; however, only they appear onscreen, as if their meeting placed them in a different time and space, making these moments more intimate and giving more importance to their love story (see Figure 2). The universe seems to have been created to make their meeting possible. These meetings usually end in Sam’s studio apartment, which evokes comfort through its smallness and dim lights, and through the many objects it contains (a television, a turntable, VHS tapes, books, a coffee table with food, a bed). It is in this studio that Michelle and Sam kiss for the first time, and later, make love.

These intimate moments usually take place in the evening. As Will Straw (2014, 2015) highlights, the night is a force capable of defining a space, it has a sensibility of its own. The urban night, more precisely, evokes a space-time of “reinvention, transgression and aesthetic fluidity” and is a source of hedonistic and morally suspect pleasures (Straw, 2014, p. 199). In literature and



Figure 2: Michelle and Sam are alone in their world. Screenshot from *A Summer's End – Hong Kong 1986*

cinema, the night is often part of a journey of discovery and becomes a form of escape (Straw, 2014). In *ASE*, the urban night is a refuge from heteronormative society: it allows Michelle to escape from Joey, who seems interested in her and invites her to the restaurant on several occasions, and from her controlling mother, Mrs. Cheung, who waits for her every evening at home and pressures her to get married. The night becomes a space-time of possibilities, “a field of options and opportunities” (Straw, 2015, para. 14): time seems to stretch, queer desires become more and more palpable, and Michelle becomes aware of her attraction to Sam. The player who accepts to be affected by the atmosphere of the game – by the neon colours of Mong Kok and by the bewitching and at times sensual music – can feel the connection between the two young women and be “moved.” *ASE* somewhat poses the question of the representation of affects in video games. The game answers this question by showing that affects can be transmitted to the player through ambience, and more specifically, through the vibrations that colours and music generate in the player’s body.

As Bruce Bégout (2020) notes, ambience “subtly penetrates the ego by opening it up to an affective mediance that broadens its field of experience” (p. 305, author’s translation). According to Bégout, we are constantly immersed into an ambience, enveloped by it, and ambience determines our affective dispositions (pp. 7, 51):

The world is not revealed to us from a theoretical or practical point of view. It reveals itself within this resonance. For what we feel in the first place are not things endowed with objective qualities, but, all around us, tones, atmospheres, vague excitations that attract or repel us. (2020, p. 8, author's translation)

But as Bégout (2020) suggests, a pleasant ambience is always surrounded by a halo of worry (p. 270). For Michelle, the urban night represents both a vibrant space-time filled with opportunities, and a frightening and transgressive one because it is associated with queer desires. Michelle feels that what she is doing is wrong. After spending the night with Sam, she asks herself:

Why did I... / Do such a thing with Sam? / ... / ... / ... / An answer floated up from my subconscious and lingered in my mind. / I dared not to even have the thought be uttered. / I was frightened by myself. / I did something wrong. / I did something shameful. / I had to face my own wrongdoing and go. / There was no possibility of anything working out between us beyond this one night.

Several times in the game, Michelle mentions being ashamed of herself and being afraid to bring shame to her family, and talks about the need for her to preserve her reputation if she is to get a better job. This fear of losing face, to re-take the expression of Erving Goffman (1955; see also Qi, 2017), leads Michelle to reject her queer identity and to mistrust Sam, and eventually pushes her to stop seeing Sam for several weeks. Mistrust here is inextricably linked to Michelle's need for security and to her desire to live a "good life" as defined by the society of the time. Later in the game, while Michelle is at the restaurant with Joey, she sees Sam leaving the premises. Time stops and the player is entrusted with the most important decision of the game: staying with Joey or following Sam. If the player chooses to follow Sam, Michelle confesses her feelings for her and kisses her in a torrential rain (see Figure 3). While Michelle previously trusted Sam while being reluctant, her trust in her now takes on a whole new dimension: it takes the form of a "'jump' into the void" (Marzano, 2010, p. 54, author's translation), and for the first time in the game, intimacy is possible in the public space. Michelle even says: "And in the torrential rain, / We kissed. / It didn't matter to me at all if anyone else saw this," and a few lines later: "It didn't matter who saw us or heard us. / We had nothing to fear. / I felt cleansed." Trust here is so strong thanks to love that it becomes "a protective envelope that makes action in the world possible," it allows one to blossom, and it makes existence possible (Bégout, 2020, p. 293, author's translation). This trust reaches its peak when Michelle and Sam make love, and when Michelle, who is usually reserved and composed, completely surrenders to Sam: "I shouted out something loudly. / It was embarrassing how out of control Sam made me feel." This scene is also visually more explicit than the other intimate scenes in the game.



Figure 3: Michelle kisses Sam in a torrential rain. Screenshot from *A Summer's End – Hong Kong 1986*

Lastly, this reflection on trust and uncertainty is related to the context of the time and to the future handover of Hong Kong to China. Michelle mistrusts the future and considers immigrating to the United States, while Sam wants to stay in Hong Kong and see what the future holds. Marzano (2010) interestingly writes: “Trust between human beings arises from the moment one endeavours to live and sojourn in a place of transit, in the space of the back-and-forth of the encounter” (p. 63, author’s translation). Hong Kong appears here as a space of transit closely linked to trust. As Mark Bray and W. O. Lee (1993) wrote before the handover:

Unlike the majority of territories, the termination of Hong Kong’s colonial rule will lead not to sovereignty but to incorporation in another state. Hong Kong has been promised self-government within the People’s Republic of China, but the framework is involuntary and the degree of self-governance is uncertain. (p. 557)

Meanwhile, Ackbar Abbas (1997) describes Hong Kong as “a city of transients” (p. 46). As he explains:

Much of the population was made up of refugees or expatriates who thought of Hong Kong as a temporary stop, no matter how long they stayed. The sense of the temporary is very strong, even if it can be entirely counterfactual. The city is not so

much a place as a space of transit. It has always been, and will perhaps always be, a port in the most literal sense – a doorway, a point in between – even though the nature of the port has changed. (Abbas, 1997, p. 46)

In a certain way, Hong Kong can also be associated with queerness. Helen Hok-Sze Leung (2008, p. 5) and Lucetta Kam (2017) compare Hong Kong's political uncertainty following the postcolonial transition to the unpredictability and fear of queer desires. Like Hong Kong, queer lives are unstable and do not have a promised future (Kam, 2017). If the player chooses to stay in the restaurant with Joey and does not pursue their relationship with Sam, the game ends abruptly. The game fast-forwards to September 1997 (roughly two months after the handover), and the player learns that Michelle has married a man with whom she had a child and is about to immigrate to the United States. Without a trusting relationship with Sam, Michelle is unable to imagine a future in Hong Kong and chooses instead a heteronormative life. In contrast, if Michelle pursues her relationship with Sam, she decides to stay in Hong Kong. Thanks to trust, Michelle accepts to live in a place of transit and believes in queer love. To draw once more on Marzano (2010), trust changes Michelle's relationship with time and allows her to build a new relationship with the future.

4. CONFIDENCE AND INTIMACY

A Summer's End can be seen as an “intimacy simulator,” a term coined by Fabienne Sacy (see Bouvier, 2022) to describe visual novels. This term emphasizes the proximity and the intimate relationships the player develops with the game characters, who progressively reveal more information about themselves and who are physically close to the player (the characters are usually in front of the player and look at them while they are talking; Sacy, in Bouvier, 2022). This is in line with the work of Aaron Reed et al. (2020), who stress that visual novels “center exploration of mental and emotional spaces: of characters and relationships” (p. 149). Like many visual novels, *ASE* is written in the first person (“I”). Although the player controls Michelle, Michelle appears as a character separated from the player, as a character narrator much more than a traditional player character or avatar. The game contains several introspective sequences in which Michelle talks about her past, her family, her personality, and her impressions of Sam. The game opens with a monologue in which Michelle talks about her childhood, creating from the start an atmosphere of confidence:

I had a comfortable upbringing thanks to the hard work of my parents. / I had a very typical family. / My father worked to support the household. / And my mother was a homemaker. / . . . My father had worked his way up from a man doing odd jobs day and night until he eventually became a successful owner. / My mother came from a large family. / She wasn't given the opportunity to complete her

schooling. / . . . I suppose the sharp contrast between my upbringing compared to that of my parents was partly their desire to give me a childhood better than theirs.

While we might be inclined to consider this passage as an interior monologue, a “discourse without a listener and not spoken, through which a character expresses their most intimate thought” (Dujardin, 1931, p. 59, author’s translation), I would argue that this kind of passages in *ASE* could be seen instead as a form of confidence. The relationship the player develops with Michelle over the course of the game takes the form of a double “unlocking,” as theorized by Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni and Véronique Traverso (2007). As the authors point out, the confidence implies a mutual relationship between the confidant and the *confieur*; the confidant must be available and show interest in the *confieur*, who must be willing to open up to others. The confidence ultimately “consist[s] in transferring a secret from the interiority of A [the *confieur*] to that of B [the confidant]” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni & Traverso, 2007, p. 8, author’s translation). The visual novel is a privileged form to reflect on this relationship. In the visual novel, the text appears onscreen little by little, one or two sentences at a time, and the player must press a button (left-click on the mouse, for example) for the next sentence to appear. This “minimal, repetitive, rhythmic brush of the player’s finger against the computer” is a fundamental component of the experience of playing a visual novel, as Ana Matilde Sousa (2020, p. 93) explains. Each time the player presses a button, they show to the character that they are interested in their story, that they are there and listening to them, and this in turn pushes the character to continue their confidence. The double unlocking Kerbrat-Orecchioni and Traverso refer to is here possible thanks to the inter(re)active nature of video games, i.e., the back and forth between the game and the player.

Once the player has completed two-thirds of *ASE*, the story changes perspective, and the player controls Sam during an interlude of roughly one hour. The use of an interlude adds a layer of intimacy and allows the player to see the events from the perspective of the love interest and better understand them. In *ASE*, this segment begins with a rewind effect, then, the player sees again some key moments of the story from Sam’s perspective. The theme of confidence is particularly noticeable in this segment, where Sam openly talks to the player about her feelings for Michelle: “When I first met Michelle, I was charmed at first glance. / I like women with sharp eyes. / When they look at you with that piercing gaze, I get goosebumps.” And later on: “I felt at peace. / I never felt such a feeling before with anyone,” and even: “I adore Michelle.” This interlude occurs after Michelle stops seeing Sam, and confiding in the player becomes a way for Sam to remember the good times spent with her. To a certain extent, this confidence is also a way to touch the player, to show them that Sam’s feelings are genuine, and to push them to do everything they can to reunite the two young women. This is not trivial considering that the scene

following this interlude is the one in the restaurant, where the player must decide the future of Michelle and Sam's relationship.

In *ASE*, confidence helps to build a relationship between the player and the characters. It gives the player partly access to their inner selves and aligns well with Silvestra Mariniello's (2018) take on the intimate. Quoting the *Trésor de la Langue Française* (1994), Mariniello explains that the intimate can be defined as "what is located or relates to a very deep level of the psychic life; what generally remains hidden under the appearances, impenetrable to external observation, sometimes also to the analysis of the subject itself," what "fundamentally constitutes the distinctive features of a particular individual, their essential nature; what relates to what is the most personal in them" (2018, p. 93, author's translation). While in the context of the confidence Kerbrat-Orecchioni and Traverso (2007) see the reader (or by extension the player) as an intruder, a spy, and affirm that "the confidence push[es] to its limits the *voyeuristic* character of literary communication" (p. 24, author's translation, emphasis in the original), I would argue that the player in *ASE* is not an intruder, but an *accompagnateur*. The player accompanies the characters: they are in a supportive position and act as an intermediary who seeks to make the relationship between Michelle and Sam possible. When the player is given the option to follow Sam outside the restaurant, they seize this opportunity, hoping that Michelle and Sam will reconcile and form a couple once and for all. The player is not there to spy on Michelle and Sam, but develops with them a relationship of care. They want their good and are happy to see a love story that ends positively.

5. QUEER PLAYER AND MEDIUM

For some queer players, it can be difficult to trust video games and see them as a medium capable of telling queer stories: there is always the possibility that these stories will feature stereotypical queer characters or end tragically. Before playing a game (or watching a film) with queer characters, I usually read about it online to make sure it has a happy ending. I have seen enough tragic queer stories that I am now looking for narratives which allow for queer joy. As Marzano (2010) highlights, trust can be dangerous: "it always comes with the risk that the custodian of our trust does not live up to our expectations or, worse still, that he deliberately betrays the trust we have in him" (p. 54, author's translation). We are not all equal when it comes to the question of trust, and it is more difficult for groups who have historically been erased or misrepresented in video games (and other media) to trust this medium. In her work on affects, Ahmed (2010) notes that we orient ourselves toward certain objects, and we could argue here that video games have an affective value and that players orient themselves toward certain games more than others. This leads us to play games that we find challenging, entertaining, satisfying, or awe-inspiring, but also to avoid orienting ourselves toward certain games because we fear discrimination or believe they might hurt us. In order to understand how

affect operates within video games, we need to take into account our previous experiences with them, how they made us feel, and what we expect from them. As Brian Massumi (2002) explains, affect is like “a background perception that accompanies every event” (p. 36). Affect permeates “in memory, in habits, in reflex, in desires, in tendencies” and gives the body “a kind of depth that stays with it across all its transitions” (Massumi, 2015a, p. 4).

ASE tells a beautiful love story between two women and gives queer players confidence in the capacity of video games to tell such stories. To transpose Mariniello's (2018) observation on cinema, I would highlight that through Michelle and Sam, queer players can see themselves as beings capable of action. Existing in the mediatic space gives them the strength, the desire, and the courage to exist in the public space (Mariniello, 2018). At the end of the game, Michelle finds the strength to exist in the public space as a queer woman. The queer player, who made this possible, finds the strength to exist symbolically in the public space alongside Michelle and Sam, and hopefully, will find the strength to exist in the “real” world as well. *ASE* does feel a little dramatic at times – Michelle struggles to accept her sexuality and her mother first rejects her – and in that sense, the game might not be filled with queer joy, especially if we define queer joy as the “exhilarating feeling that comes from being able to express our queerness clearly and with force” (Woo, 2021, para. 4). But there is no one definition of queer joy, and after coming across several definitions, it became clear to me that queer joy can mean many things. Here are a few definitions I find particularly compelling:

To be yourself while trying to live is a lot. . . . The experience of feeling like you're the only one, (but then) finding community, is the act of finding queer joy. It feels like freedom. (Esposito, qtd. in Coury, 2021, para. 8)

the freedom and resilience that comes from living my truth, unapologetically so. (Gomez, qtd. in Coury, 2021, para. 33)

truly feeling safe for the first time. (Johnson, qtd. in Coury, 2021, para. 40)

a positive feeling that we get from encountering signs of progress in gender equality and gender diversity. (Oxfam, 2022, section “Queer Joy Is a Positive Feeling,” para. 2)

Queer joy is bittersweet: even amidst the celebration, we never forget those who fall victim to these crises due to their gender identity and expression or sexual orientation. (Oxfam, 2022, section “Queer Joy Is Bittersweet,” para. 2)

ASE offers a bittersweet story that ends positively, and in light of the above definitions, I would argue that it allows for a form of queer joy. As Massumi

(2015b) explains, “joy is much more than a pleasure. It registers the invention of new passions, tendencies, and action-paths that expand life’s powers, flush with perception. It registers becoming” (p. 71). *ASE* is a story about finding oneself, connecting with someone and building intimacy, feeling free and comfortable, and being resilient. For the player, it is also an occasion to see the progress that has been made in terms of LGBT+ rights while not forgetting the work that still needs to be done. If Mariniello (2018) talks about the power of cinema, I would talk here about the power of the video game medium, and more particularly, that of the visual novel, which in recent years has offered several touching queer stories³ and has truly become a reparative genre and a privileged space for certain queer gaming communities, notably in North America. Roughly 47.67% of the video games with LGBT+ content on itch.io ($N = 3713$) and 57.78% of those on Steam ($N = 1456$) are visual novels.⁴ Anastasia Salter et al. (2018) describe the visual novel as one of the two genres “primarily associated with queer narratives” (p. 3), the other one being the walking simulator, while Reed et al. (2020) argue that the visual novel has allowed for alternate modes of design and for the portrayal of marginalized identities, thus becoming an interesting genre for “outsider creators” (p. 149). This feeling is also present among game journalists and players. In my work on the visual novel, I have highlighted that the Steam review page of *Coming Out on Top* was a positive space where players were sharing funny anecdotes and meaningful memories about the game, with some players even talking openly about their sexual orientation (Poirier-Poulin, 2022). One can also easily find online blog entries and newspaper articles with lists of must-play LGBT+ visual novels, notably to celebrate Pride Month (e.g., Morales, 2020; Naja B., 2021; Pennington, 2022), and Reddit pages discussing visual novels with queer content (e.g., r/RainbowOtome, r/BLgame, r/visualnovels, r/FurryVisualNovels) – this kind of lists and forums are much harder to find for other game genres.

3. We can notably think of *Coming Out on Top* (Obscurasoft, 2014), *Her Tears Were My Light* (NomnomNami, 2016), *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator* (Game Grumps, 2017), *Butterfly Soup* (Brianna Lei, 2017), *Coffee Talk* (Toge Productions, 2020), and *A YEAR OF SPRINGS* (npckc, 2021).

4. Data was collected on January 20, 2023, using the tags “LGBT,” “LGBTQIA,” and “Visual Novel” on itch.io (video games with both the “LGBT” and “LGBTQIA” tags were counted only once) and “LGBTQ+” and “Visual Novel” on Steam.

This relationship between the audience and the medium is also explored in *ASE*. The game draws an interesting parallel between Michelle and Sam’s lives and the Chinese film *New Women* (新女性; Chusheng, 1935). The film tells the story of a music teacher in search of independence and dignity who loses her job after refusing the advances of the school board minister. The film explores the social restrictions imposed on women in 1920s China and denounces patriarchy, predatory news media, and the objectification of women. *New Women* ends tragically with the suicide attempt of the protagonist (who then dies at the hospital) and is all the more tragic considering that it is inspired by the suicide of Chinese actress Ai Xia (艾霞), and that Ruan Lingyu (阮玲玉), who had the leading role, killed herself shortly after the film’s release. *New Women* became emblematic of the feeling of suffocation many women had at the time. After watching the film, Michelle tells herself:



Figure 4: The character of Cecilia (right) is inspired by the Hongkongese singer and actress Anita Mui. Screenshot from *A Summer's End – Hong Kong 1986*

The main character... / She struggled every moment in the film to be accepted as an equal in society. / She struggled until everything was taken away from her. / Everything she did almost felt like it was done in vain. / It was a very depressing movie.

Although the film deals primarily with the woman question and is in line with the May Fourth Movement and the emergence of the feminist ideal of the “New Woman,” Michelle sees a larger narrative that connects with the challenges faced by everyone who is marginalized by society, including queer people. In her own way, Michelle offers a queer reading of the film by interpreting the protagonist’s story as that of an individual who goes against social norms and whose life is “at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (Halperin, 1995, p. 62). Despite *New Women’s* tragic story and the circumstances surrounding this film, Sam remains optimistic. She tells Michelle:

we have to be hopeful. / I’d like to think things are a little better now than they were then. / Ruan left a spectacular legacy. / But we can’t forget her tragedy. The messages of the film still apply to today’s society. / It’s not easy to change people’s perceptions.

For Michelle and Sam, cinema is a trustworthy medium that allows the spectator to spend time with the past and reflect on social change. *ASE* also contains references to Cantonese opera singer Yam Kim-fai (任劍輝), known for her cross-dressing performances, and to Brigitte Lin (林青霞), described as “the biggest superstar of Taiwan and Hong Kong” and who arguably became a global icon thanks to her genderqueer roles. Even more noteworthy is the game’s reference to Anita Mui (梅艷芳), a queer icon of the 1980s and 1990s famous for her films and her contribution to Cantopop as well as for her flamboyant performances that challenged traditional gender representations. According to the developers, Anita Mui inspired the character of Cecilia, one of Sam’s close friends who owns a nightclub popular among “girls in the know” (Oracle & Bone, 2021; see Figure 4). All these references are a way to pay homage to several women who have marked the cultural life of Hong Kong and to invite the player to (re)discover their history.

For both the player and the game characters, the past generates an empowering form of queer nostalgia. As Nishant Shahani (2013) points out, nostalgia is filled with political possibilities: it helps to forge a collective memory, to create a space of belonging in the present, and to imagine a different future using the affective force of the past. Along the same lines, Gilad Padva (2014) reminds us that (re)telling or reinventing the past has played (and continues to play) a major role in shaping an LGBT+ legacy with its own icons and symbols (p. 6). Queer nostalgia is a “journey to the irrecoverable, the written off, the forbidden and the neglected” (Padva, 2014, p. 8). It serves as a “therapeutic process of coming to terms with who we are, what we want to be, and what we can be” (Padva, 2014, p. 11). In *ASE*, revisiting the past becomes a way to disrupt reality, to make history less limited, to stay hopeful, and to trust the future. At the end of the game, Sam is working on an archival film project and on the screening of queer films that have been overlooked; she thus seeks to reopen a past that was symbolically closed – this is also the work *ASE* accomplishes.

A game like *ASE* is reparative and allows for a form of healing: it is soothing to be told that everything will be alright. The game ends with a warm and comforting image: Michelle and Sam are sitting next to each other, hand in hand, in the restaurant where they ate together when they first met (see Figure 5). They are surrounded by a halo of light that makes the scene even more intimate and highlights the softness of their clothes. Michelle’s eyes are closed and her head is resting against Sam’s shoulder. She is at peace with herself. The game leaves the player with the words of Michelle, full of hope:

It is a continual struggle to feel truly accepted by everyone. / But I’m ever hopeful. /
I have my own pride and dignity. / . . . / All I want to do is to live freely, without



Figure 5: Michelle is at peace with herself. Screenshot from *A Summer's End – Hong Kong 1986*

guilt and shame. / I know if it wasn't for Sam, I couldn't be at all like this. / I'm glad to have met Sam. / . . . / I'm sure things will be all right for us both. / I know there will be uncertainty ahead of us. / But it is the life that I have chosen for myself.

While the player has accompanied Michelle throughout the game, it is *ASE* that accompanies the player once the game is over, that resonates with them and leaves them with a feeling of well-being; that has the potential to change their daily life and their way of being in the world.

Following Marzano (2010), I would conclude by stressing that trust always generates bonds, whether it is between fictional characters; between the characters and the player; between the player and the medium; or between the past, the present, and the future. While *ASE* opened with a music that reminded me of a beating heart, the game ends with a song that makes me want to keep moving forward.⁵ This song is filled with inspiring lyrics and powerful images: “Doors open,” “Starring ahead,” “Are you ready?,” “The world is yours,” “A hard-fought victory,” and “Follow your heart.” The euphonious voice of Dana Jean Phoenix reverberates and envelopes me, giving me the impression of being free. I cannot help but imagine Michelle and Sam leaving for a scooter ride to explore Hong Kong, and I want to go on an adventure with the boldness they gave me. Like them, I want to love, to blossom. I want to live in the present, rediscover the past, and believe in the future.

5. I am referring here to the song “Dream,” by Timecop1983, featuring Dana Jean Phoenix.

The credits roll and the game ends with an open ending. I am entrusted with the power to fill the void, to imagine Michelle and Sam's future. Will they stay together? Was it a fleeting romance? Without hesitation, I choose to imagine that their love story continues. I fully trust their love and I need such stories. I need more queer joy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Marion Froger, Lauren Watson, and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this manuscript. I am also grateful to Jo-Tzu Huang and Fabienne Sacy for insightful discussions.

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