'Unlike the aimless flaneur, the computer player (like the shopper, the snapper and the hack) loiters with intent' (Stallabrass, 1993, p.100)

Introduction

I am walking in the woods. I can hear chains clicking and children singing a hypnotic and ominous chant. I pick up a flower. I have no idea where I am. Running makes me lose my bearings as the screen goes blurry and I cannot find the girl in white – the only friendly face out there – to get me back on the path. After more than half an hour of walking slowly, interacting with unlikely objects, the colours and the music change. I exult, I think I found my wolf: I am finally going to die. I am playing *The Path* (Taleoftales, 2009).

The Path is a peculiar game. Described by developer Tale of Tales as a 'short horror game inspired by older versions of Little Red Riding hood, set in modern day' (Harvey & Samyn, 2009, n.p.), it is designed as an exploratory experience with no monster to defeat nor puzzle to solve and gives complete freedom to the player to venture into a dark forest. Developed by two game designers and one modeler, more than half of its budget came from non-commercial art grants. The game was praised by the press (Onyett, 2009; Miniblob, 2009), but received mixed reactions from the gamers, mostly because of their disagreement about whether *The Path* should be considered a game (Harvey & Samyn, 2010; Onyett, 2009; Miniblob, 2009).

The structure of *The Path* runs counter to Stallabrass's argument (1993) that computer games are far from being an idle and innocent practice as they present a 'precise, reversed reflection of the preoccupations and even the techniques of capitalist power' (p.103). Using Adorno,

Stallabrass writes that free time is chained to modern industrialised society, which strictly divides "unproductive" from productive time. However, working habits have become so engrained in our daily life that we internalize modes of behavior that are 'appropriate to work' and 'smuggle' them 'into leisure' (Adorno, 1991, p.190). As such, Stallabrass claims that games are nothing but simulations that reproduce sets of capitalist social practices, norms, values and patterns.

Stallabrass' views differ from the commonly negative perception of video games. Indeed, despite their established place in Western consumerist society (Diplomats, 2016), they are still considered a 'waste of time' (Purchese, 2008), even among people who play games regularly (Duggan, 2015). Articles describing video games as unproductive and blaming them for young men's educational and life failure remains prevalent in the public sphere (Parkin, 2016; Etchells, 2015), suggesting that ideas grounded in much older legacies, such as Protestantism (play as 'the antithesis of work' (Butler et al., 2011)), still shape today's society.

However, this criticism does not apply to *The Path* either, as it challenges the definition of gaming through its slow and unrewarding gameplay. Focusing on *The Path*, this article aims at moving beyond the duality between the concepts of productivity and idleness in order to explore how the practice of gaming can escape heteronormative time. Positioning the gamer as a flâneur, I argue that *The Path* locates the player in a queer[1] time through the fragmentation of its narrative, but also the shattering of heteronormative imagery – such as the

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[1] In this chapter, I follow Halberstam's definition of queer, a concept which encompasses 'nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time' (p.6).

figure of the child as pure and innocent – and its reappropriation in a queer text. Ultimately, this article argues that gaming has the potential to be considered a site of queer practice. In order to perform this reading I first introduce my critical framework comprised from exploring how queer lifestyles detach themselves from normative time and focusing on the practice of flânerie as queer performance.

Methodological Details

Independent games are often allowed to be more experimental than AAA titles and can, therefore, detach themselves from mainstream gameplay conventions. Such is the case of *The Path* (Tale of Tales, 2009), which lets the player (almost) aimlessly wander in mysterious woods. As a contemplative and disorientating experience, *The Path* appeared as a strong case study to approach queer deconstruction of gaming, but also to help building an argument applicable to a relatively wide range of independent game titles that share some similarities in their gameplay, such as *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2012) or *Flower* (thatgamecompany, 2009), which all stray from the fast-paced, violent and sensational nature of mainstream gaming (IGN, 2009).

I played *The Path* first and foremost as a gamer, but invariably I also played it as a researcher. One of the key challenges of studying games is their overall length. However, they are intertextual[2] and can be understood as both text and hypertext that operate across these different platforms. Consequently, there are ways in which one game researcher can engage with games without having to play an entire game several times, such as following walkthroughs[3] videos

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2   One game's text creates interrelations between those of other games.
[3] A step-by-step video/ document that guides you through one entire game

on media platforms such as YouTube. Indeed, YouTube has become a remarkable database for video games walkthroughs, allowing viewers to watch a game being played. These walkthroughs are divided in chapter, which enables viewers to access, but also re-watch indefinitely particular moments, cut-scenes[4] and dialogues, without needing to replay or load a game repeatedly. This flexibility facilitated the study of *The Path* and allowed me to re-experience specific moments of gameplay, as a viewer this time. As such, in addition to playing *The Path* for more than 13 hours (and "finishing" the game twice), I also watched walkthrough videos (CinnamonToastKen, 2013).

Although watching a YouTube video of a game is different from playing the game, I did not consider it a hindrance in my research as these videos did not replace, but rather complemented the time I spent playing. More importantly, this research would not have benefitted from additional hours of gameplay. As such, YouTube added a multifaceted dimension to my own gaming experience.

Queer Time

We follow 'temporal orders inscribed in organizational life which produce assumed and expected heteronormative trajectories' (Riach et al. 2014, p.1678). Citing Bourdieu (1977), Freeman (2005) adds that these strategies of power rely on playing on the time of the action and extend 'beyond local conflicts to [the] management of entire populations' (p.57). She calls these strategies 'chronopolitics' (p.57) from which she develops the concept of 'chrononormativity' (2010, p.3). Chrononormativity is 'the use of time to organize individual

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[4] A cutscene or event scene (sometimes in-game cinematic or in-game movie) is a sequence in a video game that is not interactive, breaking up the gameplay.

human bodies toward maximum productivity' (p.3). Echoing Thompson's argument about the development of productive time during the industrial revolution, chrononormativity frames daily habits and routines in order to maximize productivity and reproductivity, but also defines the "right" time for particular life stages such as studying, marrying, life parenting or investing (Cosenza, 2014, p.156). Chrononormativity also 'produces a "natural" sense of belonging' (p.156) by setting these life stages as "normal", and makes time bind our bodies to the arbitrary schedule of capitalism and heteronormativity (Freeman, 2005, p.60).

A large group of scholars have dedicated their work to the identification of queer temporalities and how they manifest themselves in contemporary Western society (Monaghan, 2016; Bersani, 1995; Edelman, 2004, Muñoz, 2009). It is generally agreed that the dominant paradigm of queer temporality stemmed from anti-social queer theory, characterised by the shift away from projects of reclamation within queer theory 'towards a negative, anti-social and anti-relational theory of sexuality' (Monaghan, 2016, p.14). While Leo Bersani is often considered one of the founders of the anti-relational approach – he argues that 'homo-ness' (p.15) is inherently anti-social – it is often the position of Lee Edelman that now dominates the anti-relational field (p.15). Edelman argues that queerness runs counter reproductive futurism and, therefore, 'bar[s] … every realization of futurity' (2004, p.4). Although Edelman does not engage deeply with the notion of temporality, he places queerness in a time and place that are excluded from heteronormative society. Other theorists such as Muñoz (2009) responds to Edelman by providing a more hopeful approach to queerness and qualifying his statement by arguing that while queerness is not 'yet there', that it can be enacted in order to produce glimpses of a queer future (p.1).

Following the antisocial trajectory, Halberstam (2005) specifically focuses on the relationship between queerness, temporality and space. Their argument derives from David Harvey (1990), the precursor of chrononormativity, who argues that time and space are perceived as natural to individuals only because most of them are unable to think outside the logic of capital accumulation. As a result, any alternative strategy will receive negative emotional responses such as guilt and frustration. Halberstam mainly criticises Harvey for missing obvious opportunities to discuss the process of naturalisation of time in relation to gender and sexuality. They argue that queerness can be imagined as 'an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices' (2005, p.1). As such it can be detached from pure sexual identity and associated with a wider disruption of heteronormative ways of living. Halberstam aims at showing how transgender bodies and queer subcultural lives can be situated in a time as outside of the parameters of heterosexual lifestyles and, therefore, time.

The first part of Halberstam's book focuses on the tragic murder of Brandon Teena in 1993, who, after passing as a man and dating local girls in Nebraska, was raped and killed by two locals. Halberstam explores Brandon's case and studies transgender representations in several movies, including *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), which is based on the aforementioned murder. The rest of the book explores shorter illustrations of queer subcultures, ranging from music albums to contemporary art. In their case studies, Halberstam identifies instances of queer time and space such as the *Boys Don't Cry*'s scene of Lana's room, in which the latter preserves Brandon's body as male and refuses to assign him a gender according to his sex. As such, Lana's room evokes a space where time is suspended, sheltered from heteronormative norms and violence, represented by Lana's friends – Tom and John – in the living room, who later rape and kill Brandon.

In their book, Halberstam (2005, p.2) demonstrates that queer subcultures produce 'alternative temporalities' that allow queer individuals to believe that their 'future can be imagined according to logics that lie outside' heteronormative markers of life experience. Embodying an unknown future, queer life narratives are 'non-linear' in their temporality as they do not follow celebrated heterosexual milestones (Monaghan, 2016, p.14). In this context, cultural products that deliver queer narratives must construct 'alternate narrative forms that challenge the linearity' of traditional narratives (p.22). Consequently, films, novels or games that present cyclic, non-linear or timeless stories offer modes of representation that can be read through queer theory as they depict non-sequential modes of temporality.

The Flâneur: Resisting Industrialised Time

The flâneur is a particular historical figure who embraces queer time. Reintroduced to 20th century criticism by Walter Benjamin (1999), who defines him as a male figure 'that has its origin in the modern metropolis, particularly, nineteenth century Paris' (Ivanchikova, 2007, p.20), the flâneur is depicted as a 'chronicler of his and his own epoch's misery and a witness to his times, as a rigorous observer, an amateur geographer and historian' (p.20). Because of its loose definition, the flâneur remains 'an ambiguous and much contested concept' (Rasmussen & Kenway, 2004, p.51). For instance, Gluck (2003) distinguishes the 'popular flâneur', who embodies 'the ideals of a dynamic urban culture and sensibility' from the 'avant-garde flâneur', who corresponds to Benjamin's definition. The confusion between both often leads people to view the flâneur as a privileged bourgeois male who dominates the

social spaces of the modern city (Wolff, 1990) and destabilizes masculinity by deliberately choosing idleness, regardless of their financial or social situation.

As a result, the avant-garde flâneur has been recuperated in various contexts: Sally Munt (1995, p. 117)) uses her as a vessel for lesbian narratives while seeking to 'contribute to the unfixing of the supremacy of the heterosexual male gaze in urban spatial theory'. Kenway and Bullen (2001) apply the flâneur to cyber individuals who perform *flânerie* in the 'interwoven webs of the internet and the corporate world' (Rasmussen & Kenway, 2004, p.48). Taking a more global perspective, Edensor (1998) argues that *flânerie* is a practice that is now rarely experienced in Western cities because of their 'channeling of the gaze, overarching surveillance [and] disciplining of movement' (p.218), but suggests that it remains in sites such as 'the Indian street' (p.218).

Because of their cultivation of pleasures that are related to 'one's non-instrumental, non-pragmatic experience of space' and ultimately, their 'refusal to take a respectable socio-economic, sexual, or gender role' (Rasmussen & Kenway, 2004, p.24), the flâneur is often recuperated by queer theory (ibid; Ivanchikova, 2007; Chisholm, 1999). This article concentrates on Ivanchikova's (2007) theory of 'postmodern queer flâneurs' (p.21) as it specifically explores the queer relationship between contemporary flânerie, time and space. The postmodern queer flâneurs 'emphasize diverse forms of reading, and more often than not, misreading the city, diverse forms of relating to space, time and their own desire' (p.21). Articulating 'queer spatiality', the postmodern flâneurs resort to three different practices: the '*appropriation* (reprogramming space originally programmed as heteronormative), *queering* (creating queer possibilities through 'marking' heteronormative territory) and *actualization* of space (activating queer possibilities dormant in space)' (p.28).

In his thesis, Carlaw (2008) echoes these practices by focusing on Twentieth Century New York flâneurs, through works of gay poets such as O'Hara and Ginsberg. He argues that gay flâneurs in New York were put in a position of marginality and, therefore, left vulnerable. In order to survive, they rewrote 'the heterosexual centre' and converted 'straight space into gay space' as a 'form of urban self-defence' (p.163). Threats posed by the workmen and groups of Puerto Ricans roaming the streets were transformed in their poems into subjects of gay adoration. In "A Step Away from Them", O'Hara (1995) focuses on workmen's dirty and glistening torsos, transforming them into 'camp street performers' (Carlaw, 2008, p.159). As the works of Munt and Ivanchikova demonstrate, the figure of the flâneur does not solely apply to gay men, but can be extended to other genders, as long as they queer space through the rewriting of places and people.

The flâneurs 'approach the question of time similarly to the way [they] approach […] space' (Ivanchikova, 2007, p.41). Situated as the opposite of chrononormativity, these practices include the 'art of slowing down the flow of time; the art of idleness or refusal to engage in goal-oriented activities; and the practice of de-scheduling, which can be also understood as one's continuous withdrawal from heteronormatively defined reproduction of prescribed social routine'[5] (p.42). If we consider the urban mass as a symbol of human alienation, the industrial society, and the transformation of human bodies into chrononormative 'machines of production' (Ivanchikova, 2007, p.43; Engels, 1845), the flâneur creates a 'dramatic discordance' (Ivanchikova, 2007, p.43) between their own and the crowd's pace, but also

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[5] For example, Benjamin (1968) mentions the habit among some nineteenth century flâneurs to walking turtles on leashes among the streets of Paris (p.36, 37).

within their rhythm of life. They emphasize the constructed aspect of time as opposed to the received idea of a 'naturalized notion of time understood as something […] [that] occurs without our direct involvement' (p.42). With their 'reptilian-like slowness' (p.46), they explicitly resist and criticize the busyness and business-driven contemporary society. This same act of refusal opens a 'hiatus, a temporal havoc' which allows 'one to develop an alternative vision of life' (p.47).

Thus the flâneur is an 'obstacle' and a 'threat' to 'a fast-paced capitalist society' (Carlaw, 2008, p.323). This is 'a firm statement of outsidership' and a 'refusal to conform' (p.323) to the urban pace. Similarly, the queer flaneur, who articulates queer spatiality, also clogs the city's arteries through the transformation of urban symbols, such as the workmen or passers-by, into queer figures. Hence, although flâneurs are highly subversive figures, 'all it requires is a change of pace' (p.323) and an unrestrained mind.

In many respects, *The Path* uses flânerie as a core mechanic of its gameplay. As a girl, the player is asked to explore a vast forest in which they can interact with "objects" and "places" such as a TV set, drying clothes or a theatre. The played character is noticeably slow and time does not seem to matter. As such, *The Path* bathes the player in an environment where they need to give new meanings to "out-of-place" game elements and visual cues.

Forest Flânerie – Queering the Game

The Path focuses on six sisters of different ages whose names evoke the colour red (Robin, Rose, Ginger, Ruby, Carmen, Scarlet) (picture 1). All available at the beginning of the game,

each sister must take a journey into the woods in order to reach their Grandmother's house. The game is organized in three distinctive "acts": the flat where the player chooses their character (picture 2); the forest, the main part of the game, where the player is asked to explore, find objects and maybe encounter the "wolf" (picture 3); and Grandmother's house. Once in the forest, the game tells the player to stay on the path. However, following this rule quickly results in a disappointing ending with a scoreboard indicating the player that no objects nor wolf have been found (picture 4), thereby revealing the main goal of the game: to stray from the path and meet the wolf. Staying on the path represents no challenge at all and can be achieved within seconds, however, leaving the path means getting lost in the forest, as the trail subsequently disappears and the map starts repeating itself whenever the character reaches the edges of the woods, making it "infinite".

Each sister's wolf is different and corresponds to their unique storyline. Robin, who is the closest character to the Perrauldian figure, meets a Werewolf in a cemetery with whom she wants to play. Rose, 'a precocious eleven-year-old' (Ensslin, 2013, p.79) who enjoys the beauty of nature, encounters a "cloud man". The adventurous Ginger is a tomboy who meets another girl who kills her. Ruby, a taciturn goth teenager who is visibly limping because of an injury or a disability, encounters a young man in a playground who seduces, and rapes and murders her. A lumberjack beheads[6] the charming and slightly narcissistic Carmen while Scarlet, the eldest, mysteriously dies by starting playing a piano in a ruined theatre in the presence of a tall and slender man with white hair.

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[6] Most of these killings are not explicit. But flashes of images at the end of the Grandmother's house "ride" strongly suggests the nature of their deaths.)

Finding the wolf triggers a small cutscene followed by a fade-out. After the encounter, the girl appears lying on the ground in front of Grandmother's house, in the rain. Colours have faded and the girls' heads are down, making them look similar to walking corpses. The walk to Grandmother's house is extremely slow, and the play shifts to a first-person perspective once inside the house. The player is then given very little control and the pressing of any button makes them advance through the house. As such, the game becomes similar to a 'ghost train' (Ryan & Costello, p.114), revealing surrealistic rooms bringing to mind the psyche of the girl chosen by the player (picture 5). The sequence ends with a series of images evoking the girl's death (picture 6), followed by a scoreboard.

The Path introduces several elements that hint at a darker and potentially queer version of the tale on which it is based: the ambiguous desire to find the wolf, the unclear death of some of the characters and the exploration of different stages of femininity. It bears similarities with other feminist and queer adaptations of the tale, such as the three wolf tales of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1982) ('The Werewolf', 'The Company of Wolves' and 'Wolf-Alice'). In Carter's first tale, Red Hiding Hood finds out that her Grandmother is actually a werewolf after cutting her paw at her house. The latter is then stoned to death as a witch and the child stays in the house and prospers. In the second story, regardless of the fear and danger that he represents, the child goes to the werewolf who devoured her Grandmother and sleeps soundly between his tender paws. In the third tale, a feral child saves a werewolf by licking his blood and wounds. In Carter's retelling of the fairy tale, female desire, sexuality and independence break free from the heterosexual male gaze.

The Path also operates similarly to David Kaplan's film adaptation of the *Little Red Riding Hood* (1997). Based on "The Story of Grandmother", 'an early French oral version collected

by Achille Millien in the Nièvre region of France in the late nineteenth century' (Orme, 2015, p.88), Kaplan's film is arguably one of the queerest adaptations of the tale so far. Orme (2015) argues that the movie 'troubles expectations raised by the title by offering a girl (Christina Ricci) who has sexual agency and seeks out her wolf (Timour Bourtasenkow) rather than being his victim' (p.89). Similar to Carter's tales, 'there is nothing ambiguous about the emphasis of the film: it focuses on female desire and a female gaze that rejoice in a young woman's artful and playful way in which she seduces an androgynous wolf' (Zipes, 2011, p.151). *The Path* and these adaptations contain material that hint at a queer reading of the tale. It is 'all about straying from the path, particularly one built on binary oppositions between masculine and feminine, active and passive, heterosexual and homosexual' (Orme, 2015, p.57).

The Path attracted a reasonable amount of attention among game scholars, mostly focusing on how the game could be seen as a deconstructive and self-reflexive experience about gaming. Indeed, it breaks an assumed hidden contract between the game and the player which stipulates what and how goals can be set and reward the player for overcoming the game's obstacles (Ryan & Costello, 2012, p.116; Huizinga, 1955; Juul, 2005; Suits, 1978). At first, *The Path* 'seems to embrace the contract' (Ryan & Costello, 2012, p.116) as it presents a simple goal and rule: going to grandma's house and staying on the path. However, it quickly establishes a new contract – once the player has failed to find the wolf after having followed the path –, an 'exploratory contract' characterized by 'secrets hidden around the virtual space' which 'yields a part of a greater story' (p.118).

Ensslin (2013) argues that *The Path* is a *détournement* type of game that focuses on self-reflexivity as it combines processes of aesthetic (p.77) with appropriation and subversion',

using what Dragona (2010) refers to as 'play as a practice to transcend rigid forms and to break constraints' (p.27). According to Ensslin, the game disrupts the experience of mainstream games by breaking rules that are usually constitutive of gameplay. It resorts to three main 'ludonarratological techniques that underline the game's subversive and self-reflexive remit more generally: metaludicity, allusive fallacy, and illusory agency' (Ensslin, 2013, p.77):

'Metaludicity refers to aspects of a game whose purpose it is to make players reflect critically upon game mechanics and gameplay […] Allusive fallacy combined the idea of "alluding" with that of purposeful deception. Players who are subjected to allusive fallacy are deliberately misled in a game – for instance, by deceptive semiotic clues. Illusory agency, finally, contains another deceptive aspect: the idea of illusion, or playful mockery by means of false appearances' (Ensslin, 2013, p.84, 85).

These readings point towards the similar conclusion that *The Path* distinguishes itself from mainstream games. However, they overlook the overwhelming dissidence of *The Path* and, subsequently, a cultural understanding of the game as a queer narrative. Indeed, proudly exposing a 'metaludic if not antiludic' agenda (81), its core elements provide both a queering of a tale and a queering of gaming.

Stating that exploring the forest is a contemplative experience would be an understatement. Most of the game's features – the eerie music[7], the repeating map, and the predominance of green, blue, and violet – contribute to the hypnotic nature of this experience. The character's

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[7] You can listen to the music here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IW8VIhJdJ0o

pace is noticeably slow and running (which would still be considered slow in comparison with most games) blurs the character's vision, preventing the player to clearly see their surroundings and interact/collect objects. In this way, the player needs to slow down and revert to walking in order to orientate themselves and collect items. The same goes with the character's thoughts and interactions which are represented by a text that slowly appears on the screen.

Additionally, players are not pressured to meet the wolf within a given time period. While "a small paw" appears on the screen on the second walkthrough in order to indicate the location of the wolf, following it immediately would consist in a very tame experience and prevent the player from "connecting" with the girl played. However, the game does not properly reward the player for spending time on collecting objects either. For instance, picking up all the 144 flowers – which is a highly time-consuming process – does not have any influence on the ending and is only acknowledged on the final scoreboard. Hence, although *The Path* encourages the player to explore as a way to learn more about the played character, it does not follow a system based upon based upon achievements and rewards. Through their slow and aimless wander, the player needs to find their own satisfaction in playing the game.

The Path's antiludic agenda runs counter to the norms of mainstream gaming and gives birth to a queer gameplay. In this light, *The Path* illustrates Halberstam (2011)'s argument about queer failure, and Ruberg (2015)'s application of this argument to games. Halberstam conceptualizes failure as a vital aspect of queer people's political negativity and argues that 'success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation' (Halberstam, 2011, p.2). Yet, they indicate that these objectives are much more difficult to achieve for queer individuals whose

'modes of common sense' are often already perceived as counterhegemonic, leading to the 'association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique' (p.89). Nevertheless, Halberstam highlights that failure 'may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world' (p.2, 3).

Ruberg (2015) applies Halberstam's concept of queer failure to gaming and alternative understandings of enjoyment and play. She focuses on the concept of fun in video games and reads it as a defining principle of video game as a medium within the community that has 'long been a guiding principle for game designers' (2015, p.110). Read from this perspective, failure becomes an escape, in games, but also beyond them, from heterosexist discipline and protects us from an orderly, predictable and scripted life.

Straying from chrononormativity and fast-paced gameplay, *The Path* fails at providing entertainment as it is hegemonically understood. Yet, this failure allows game space to be reappropriated and given new meanings. Embodying the role of the flâneur, the player is thus able to make their own sense of the interactive elements through the eyes of the six Riding Hoods. Indeed, the setting of the forest is located in a time detached from the "busyness" of the city and the only link between the two places is where the game starts: the end of a tarmac road entering the forest. In this way, flânerie in *The Path* does not occur in a typical urban setting, but a "natural" setting that is constituted of elements that are reminiscent of urban spaces (a TV set, a playground, a wheelchair, and so on). Punctuating the walkthrough, these elements seem out of place, left by themselves in the forest.

Repeating Freeman's words, the flânerie through the woods inevitably uproots these elements from their '"natural" sense of belonging' (2005, p.156). The TV set is not there to screen

news nor keep children busy by showing cartoons. Instead, white noise is mysteriously displayed on the screen while the latter is partially broken and no plugs are in sight. The same goes for the other objects and places, symbolizing leisure, chores, escapism, (the drying clothes, the playground, the syringe, the theatre), all tied to the arbitrary schedule of heteronormative capitalist daily life (p.156). Left alone in the forest, their place and role become nonsensical. The player, therefore, needs to reassemble signified and signifiers, creates new associations between these objects, and give them new meanings. Echoing Ivanchikova, these elements are ultimately actualised and appropriated by the flâneur-gamer.

Not only does flânerie in *The Path* comes into play within the game, it also applies "outside" of it by challenging the definition of gaming itself. Referring to my previous argument, *The Path* breaks the ludic contract, but also rejects the position of gaming within the heteronormative dogma of leisure and productivity. Defying quick action, *The Path* situates itself 'in opposition to commercial blockbusters and the blind frenzy surrounding run-of-the-mill shooters and other popular genres' (Ensslin, 2013, p.81). In other words, the game resists the chrononormative nature adopted by most AAA games at the risk of not being considered a game itself (Onyett, 2009; Miniblob, 2009). In this way, it thwarts the players' expectations by failing to provide challenge or fun, as understood in the hegemonic sense[8].

Running counter the fast-paced, violent and sensational nature of mainstream gaming, *The Path* is part of a larger group of independent games which emphasise self-reflexive and

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[8] Ruberg (2015) writes a fundamental piece about the potential of "no-fun" games which would apply perfectly to *The Path*. However, the scope of this article does not allow me to explore it in detail.

unrestrained exploration, and ultimately convey an alternative game experience. Such is the case of *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2012), an 'interactive parable' enabling you 'travel and explore [the game's] ancient, mysterious world alone, or with a stranger' you meet along the way' and discover 'who you are' (thatgamecompany, 2012), and *Flower* (thatgamecompany, 2009), a 'pastoral and at times chaotic', 'visual, audio and interactive escape' (IGN, 2009).

Both games' rejection of chrononormativity puts an emphasis on 'a reconnection with nature' (Parham, 2015, p.227). As such, they can be read as 'environmental texts' (Buell, 1995) by taking gamers into deserts, forgotten steppes and other 'neglected spaces' (Parham, 2015, p.223). Imbued with green political messages *Flowers* and *Journey* make us 'jump down into the mud' (Morton, 2007, p.205) instead of othering nature. Encouraging the player to wander and embrace their environments, they aim at helping achieve social and political change through the reconnection of climate to popular culture. Thus these games provide a self-reflexive and challenging experience about gaming and the reappropriation of objects and spaces within a non-chrononormative environment. Still, *The Path* slightly differs from these two games as it also enables the player to rewrite both game characters through the queering of the concept of linear time and heteronormative growth.

Red Riding Flânerie – Queering the Girls

Quoting Abbott's (1984, p.42) words about queer narratives, *The Path* 'shatters linearity, proceeds by flashes, enigmas, and yields to a florid crying-out theme of /suffering/horror'. It alienates the commonly received conception of time as 'linear' (Zakowski, 2014, p.62) and adopts a circular structure, operating as a never-ending and deconstructed loop. Indeed, the

player is free to start the storyline of the six girls in any order. Once all the "paths" have been explored, the game lets the player manipulate "the girl in white" – an additional character who can bring the characters back to the path or lead them to points of interest in the forest – to lead her to Grandmother's house, and then returns to the flat. After a short scene, the game takes the player back to the flat and shows each girl coming back to their original position. The player is then able to start each storyline again.

The Path's cyclical temporality targets the 'stable structures in society and in consciousness' and can be read as an instance of 'violations of realistic temporality' (Hume, 2005, p.121) which forces the player to reevaluate their conception of time, thereby echoing Halberstam's concept of queer time. *The Path* is not about a journey from which each character will learn. Yet it simultaneously provides a timeless stroll that leads to death and mysterious rebirth. Through this the girls remain the same. They have not grown. They have been queered.

This queering process illustrates Stockton's work (2007) about the "backward birth" of queer children. Following up on the works of Segdwick, Kincaid and Edelman, Stockton (2007, p.304) questions 'the vertical forward-motion metaphor of "growing up" by exploring the many kinds of sideways growth appearing in the twentieth century'. She investigates the consequences of the synthesis of the child (the ultimate figure of futurism) and queer identity (when this same child shatters heteronormative expectations, thereby undergoing a "straight death").

She argues that we commonly tend to view children as innocent, which results in a brutal and pressuring 'ideal' (p.12). According to her, one does not grow up 'from innocence to the adult position of protecting it' (p.12) as innocence works its own violence on individuals, particularly

when it is combined with heteronormative oppression. Paradoxically, the child is temporarily queered as he is not allowed to be sexual. As a result, Stockton supports the provocative argument that 'any and every child [is] queer' (p.3), until their heterosexuality is "unveiled", which ultimately put an end to this acceptable concept of queer innocence. As such, children are implicitly construed by our culture to be 'not-yet-straight' (2009, p.7). However, when an individual comes out as non-heterosexual, the protoqueer child is given what Stockton calls a 'backward birth' (p.6): a birthing mechanism occurring 'through an act of retrospection and after a death', the death of one's 'straight destination' (2007, p.303). Therefore, the queer innocence which should have been terminated survives and transforms into something that is no longer sacralised.

Stockton (2007) focuses on historical cases of murderous children, demonstrating how they challenge the comforting power of new life conventionally associated with children and instead creates an archive of childhood bloodbaths. Stockton demonstrates that, legally, 'there cannot be a motive to kill until there is a killing – or an attempt, or a conspiracy, to kill' (p.303). As a result, the motive to murder, just like the queerness of a child, is 'born backward from the point of (attempted) death' (p.303). Echoing Stockton's argument, *The Path* relies on the shattering of heteronormative innocence through the death wish of the six girls. Despite their apparent innocence, it can be argued that they are, in fact, attracted to their wolf, even if it costs them their lives[9]. The encounters with the wolf embody a coming-out moment, when the player realises the girl does not wish to escape, but "experience" her "wolf". As such, each

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[9] While Robin decides to play with a werewolf in a cemetery featuring a freshly dug open grave, Rose goes on a small boat to investigate a small human-shaped cloud in the center of a lake, and Carmen shares a drink with a hostile-looking lumberjack.

scene is an instance of non-normative desire such as playing with a monster, inter-generational sex (Erhart, 2003; Farrier, 2015) and, more generally, self-sacrifice.

Indeed, while the six Riding Hoods do not have clear murderous motives, their encounter inevitably leads to their death, making them potentially suicidal. Instead of embracing futurity, they all appear to accept their fates without giving up any indication of remorse, fear or anxiety. Instead, they deliver lines during the exploration of the forest which illustrates anti-relational theory and concepts of non-linear narratives. For instance, Ruby, the 'teenage-goth' of the group, jokes about death and defines it as an inconsequential stage, echoing Stockton's succession of birth, death and backward birth:

> 'Engines. And friends. Turn them off. Turn them on. Life. Death. Are they so different?'
>
> 'I must be getting old. It's about time!' (The Path, 2009).

Behind their cynicism, Ruby's lines foreshadow the narrative structure of each girl and underline the cyclical nature of the game. This also applies to Rose, who seems obsessed with the same cyclical (and somewhat holistic) vision of life and death. While she enjoys nature and delivers more cheerful lines during her *flânerie*, the maturity she shows is disturbingly uncanny for a 11-year-old:

> 'The cycle of life and death knows no beginning and no end'
>
> 'Everything is one. My molecules float in all direction. The trees, the cloud we are all one' (The Path, 2009)

Exploring the woods with Rose makes her sympathetic, but also presents her as 'different, odd', 'out of sync' (Stockton, 2007, p. 303) – tor, in other words, a queer child. The same is true for Robin, the youngest and presumably the most innocent of them all, who makes chillingly prophetic comments about digging dirt in someone's grave – presumably her own. The innocence of Ginger – a tomboy looking for adventures – and Scarlet – a young woman who cares for her sister and is passionate about the arts – undergo similar, but less obvious queering processes. Yet both of their wolves – a newfound (female) friend and piano teacher – represent their yearning, which eventually lead to their ends and, therefore, suggest their desire to die. Finally, Carmen is in her late teens and manifests a high sexual drive; a drive that leads her to a sexual encounter with a shady-looking stranger and ultimately to her death. Once again, however, some of her game lines unveil her awareness of her upcoming fall:

'The man who would save is our destroyer, but the tenderness of giving in can defeat any power' (The Path, 2009)

Thus, through the lens of Stockton's work, the first chosen girl is likely to be read as "innocent" until the player goes through their first wolf encounter and Grandmother's house. As such, the death of each Riding Hood can be equated to their heteronormative death, putting an end to their assumed "future straightness". The girls are redefined as queer during the exploration of the house, allowing a process of "backward birth" to occur. Thus, after having witnessed a girl's death, the gamer is more likely to be aware of the game's cues about the girls' non-normative desire. In the following playthroughs, the girls become part of the "horror" of the game, which consists in witnessing a child, the symbol of reproduction and secured future, wanting to die, and ultimately achieving her goal. Each of their in-game comments foreshadows their backward birth, almost turning into fragments of a "forward

birth", slowly breaking apart the oppressive and innocent straightness associated with the six girls and preparing the gamer for their queer fate. Because of their fragmented and enigmatic nature, the comments obtained through the exploration of the forest remain mysterious and secretive and give little explanation on why the girls are drawn to their wolves. As a result, time, along with rationality, remains suspended.

The Path share some similarities with *Night in the Woods* (Alec Holowka, Infinite Fall, 2017), another independent game in which the protagonist, Mae Borowski, undergoes a similar queering process through flânerie. Mae is a cat (woman) who recently dropped out from college and decided to go back to her native mining town in the Midwest. The reasons for her return remain unclear to the player, and it is only through spending several (game) afternoons with her friends that, slowly, Mae comes out of her shell and reveals a past of depression, anger issues, and even a brutal incident with a classmate after which she was ostracised by several town residents.

In this light, Mae's innocence slowly breaks apart while the player spends time with her friends and relatives. Similar to the girls from *The Path*, her darkest drives and desires cannot be fully comprehended as they escape rationality, and it is only when fragments of her thoughts are gathered through long and repetitive strolls through the city that her feelings can be temporarily grasped and experienced by the player. Mae and the six Red Riding hoods's stories are not about growing towards adulthood, as they follow a more flexible trajectory which helps them grow "sideways" (Stockton, 2007, Goetz, 2017). Their dialogues, interactions and struggles form a fragmented whole where present, past and future are merged. These instances of queer gaming form, in the words of Edmund Chang (2017, p.21), 'a collective temporal distortion' into 'queer fun, fantasy, even ecstasy'.

Thus, positioning the gamer as a flâneur challenges the ludic contract and breaks the linearity of the game's narrative structure, but also blurs and queers the identity of the game's characters. Contrary to what the game's title might suggest, *The Path* is everything but linear as the forest becomes a place of circularity where life and death blend. By straying from *The Path*, the "game flâneur" goes through a double process of 'appropriation' (Ivanchikova, 2007, p.21): not only is the forest read through the eyes of each girl, it in turn hints at the queerness of the played character. As a consequence of this queering dynamic, the player activates, through each interaction, 'queer possibilities dormant in space' (p.21) and the queer dimension of each playable character. Articulating 'queer spatiality' (p.21) and identity, flânerie slowly breaks apart the oppressive and innocent straightness of the six girls.

Conclusion

The Path fully embraces postmodern *flânerie* by encouraging the player to make sense of both the physical environment of the forest and the Red Riding Hoods' psyches. The lack of rewards, explanations of the different events and deaths of the character all contribute to a clearly anti-chrononormative experience in which time does not matter. While *The Path* can be cleared fairly rapidly, provided the player finds the wolves, it is virtually infinite. Interestingly, gameplay hours matter much less for independent games that are focused on exploration and narrative. Rejecting linearity, positioning the gamer as a flâneur enables a circular approach that relies on the death, rebirth, and ultimately queer "backward birth" of the six girls. The reasons of their queer fate remain unknown, but pieces of information come in dribs and drabs, enabling the fragmented inhabitation of their queer desire.

As I mentioned earlier, *The Path* is part of a larger group of independent games which contribute to the queering of gaming through their unusual gameplay. These games deliver a different approach to work and leisure as they do not automatically reward the gamer for the time spent playing. These games encourage flower picking (*The Path*), admiring sunbeams at twilight (*Journey)*, and randomly jumping on electric cables (*Night in the Woods*). These games allow aimless wondering, cleansing the player from the guilt of doing nothing. These games illustrate an alternative view of video games, making it a site of queer appropriation, a "flâneur medium" that is different from the oppressive heteronormative environment it is too often associated with. These games enable us to play at failing, and ultimately discover 'new possibilities for existing' (MacKlin, 2007, p.252). Finally, these games demonstrate that they have, as a medium, the potential to become a site of queer subversion, where we relish playing, but also living, 'in our own way, the wrong way' (Ruberg, 2015, p.122).

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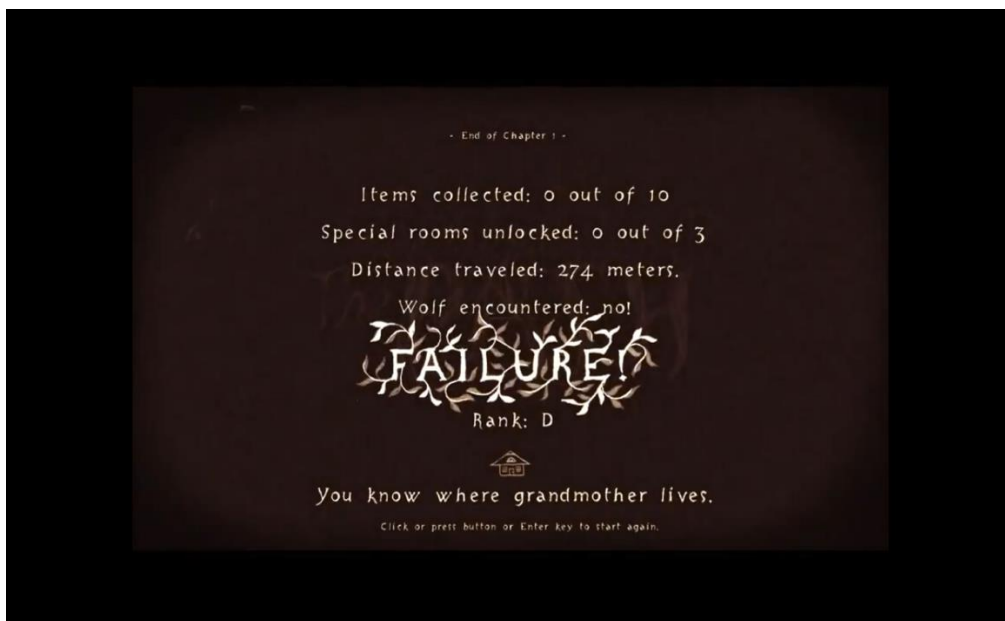
Appendix

Picture 1 (*The Path*)
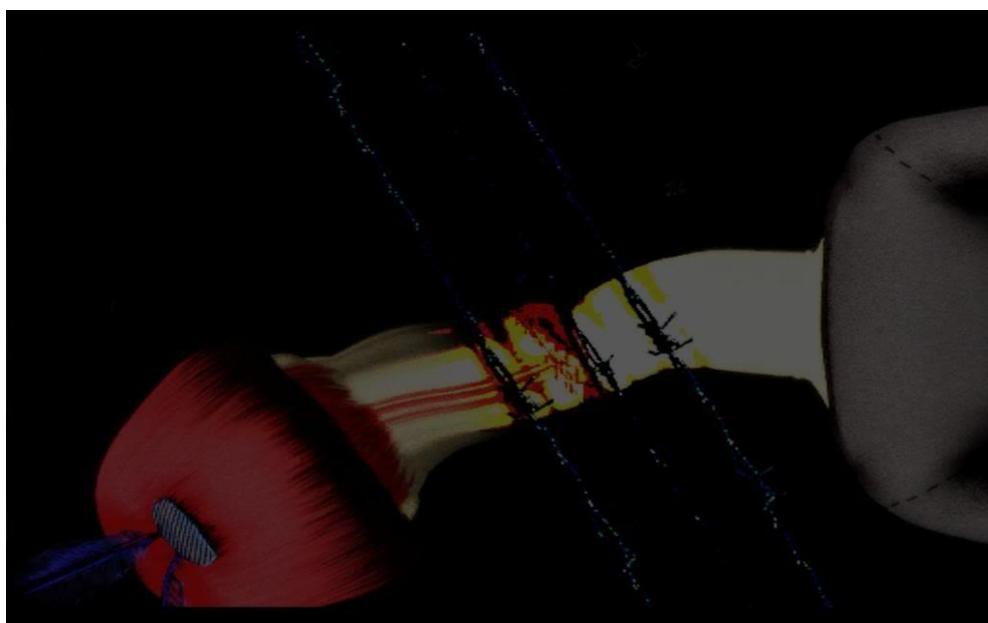

Picture 2 (*The Path*)

Picture 3 (*The Path*)

Picture 4 (*The Path*)

Picture 5 (*The Path*)

Picture 6 (*The Path*)