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# Playing with Plants, Loving Computers: Queer Playfulness beyond the Human in *Digital: A Love Story* by Christine Love and *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* by Jess Marcotte and Dietrich Squinkifer

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Play is an ambivalent concept—radical, exploratory, yet violent and exploitative. On the one hand, for critical thinkers in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, play promised liberation from seemingly firm ideological frameworks and master narratives, including, importantly, the very notion of the human subject. From Jacques Derrida’s groundbreaking essay “Sign, Structure, Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1978) to the play of signification undergirding postcolonial theory (Bhabha 1990) and gender theory (Butler 1990), play was understood as an attribute and activity of language with fundamentally disruptive, and therefore politically radical, properties. Yet, game scholars have shown that video game playing at best falls short of such a liberatory promise and at worst constitutes a training site for masculinist, heteropatriarchal, racist, and capitalist logics of expansion, accumulation, and optimization (DeKoven 2013; Juul 2018; Rettberg 2008; Taylor 2006; Yee 2006). Moreover, under capitalism, play and labor become nearly indistinguishable as games depend ever more closely on the mandate to level up and labor practices are reorganized to hide their exploitative optimization dynamics under the guise of playful assignment sequences (Pedercini 2014). These realities present theorists of playfulness with a seeming impasse: can play ever break free of these constraining masculinist circuits of domination, let alone contribute meaningfully to the exploration and articulation of utopian modes of existence?

Queerness constitutes one possible avenue through which play and playfulness may be recuperated for nonnormative, even subversive, ends. In recent years, queer game studies has emerged as a fruitful site for examining how the inflection of play through queerness might enable a counterhegemonic potential in games. In this scholarship, ‘queerness’ typically denotes the desire to live differently, to lead a life that is structured by as yet unknown relationships, loves, and communities (Shaw and Ruberg 2017, p. x). Bonnie Ruberg has theorized the notion of “playing queer” (2019, p. 17), which can be a nonnormative attitude as well as an affect assumed by players, while Edmond Chang has articulated how “queergaming” (2017, p. 15) functions as a type of “countergaming” (Galloway 2006, p. 109) that resists the logics by which games are usually played. Further, queer theorist Jack Halberstam’s (2011) notion of the queer art of failure has raised failure, both voluntary and involuntary, into the center of scholars’ understanding of how queer players refuse the operative logics of domination and mastery. Such scholarship has productively opened up the notion of playfulness to queer, often utopian, dimensions; yet it has done little to interrogate the centrality of the human subject in play, even as some queer game scholars have begun the work of conceptualizing playfulness as a willing submission of the self to the desires of another (Brice 2017, p. 78).

This article builds on existing queer game studies scholarship to articulate how queer forms of playfulness can displace the human and the subject from their privileged positions in relation to the nonhuman and the object. It argues that such playfulness dreams into being an alternative mode of sociality founded on queer notions of love without mastery and without the assimilation of Otherness into the self. Examining two queer indie games, *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* (2017) by Jess Marcotte and Dietrich Squinkifer and *Digital: A Love Story* (2010) by Christine Love, the article shows how relationships between the player and nonhuman game characters—plants and computers—enable players to playfully subject themselves to desires they cannot contain and Others they cannot control, and in so doing experience queer, ambiguous forms of pleasure somewhere between Jesper Juul’s “pleasure spiked with pain” (2013, p. 9) and the poststructuralist notion of *jouissance*. In what follows, I first examine queer game studies scholarship in order to tease out those of its dimensions of queerness that enable the current project’s notion of queer human–nonhuman sociality. I then delineate how *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* dispenses with win and loss states and rules and how its complete lack of player guidance centralizes the pleasure of the plant as opposed to that of the human. Finally, I discuss how *Digital: A Love Story* interpellates the player to become part of a nonhuman world in which subjectivity and desire are properties not of the human, but of computer-mediated text. For both games, I demonstrate how queer playfulness enables human players to enter a new type of amorous relationality in which the Otherness of plants and computers remains irreducible, the pleasure of play is distributed among humans and nonhumans, and the human is opened up to vulnerability and uncertainty as well as strange and exciting new forms of love.

## Queer Games for Not (Just) Human Players

This article joins a growing body of scholarship that focuses on the contributions of queer theory and queer artistic practice to games. Yet, in describing love between human players and computers and plants as queer, this project shifts the operative valence of ‘queer’ somewhat from its denotative foci in field-defining works like *Queer Game Studies* (Ruberg and Shaw 2017) and *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (Ruberg 2019). Queerness, Ruberg explains, “is used in two distinct yet interrelated senses. At its most basic, queer serves as an umbrella term for people and experiences that do not conform to mainstream norms of gender and sexuality” (2019, p. 7). In its second, “more conceptual” sense, queerness is “a way of being, doing, and desiring *differently*”—a way of “resist[ing] the hegemonic logics that dictate what it means to be an acceptable, valued, heteronormative (or homonormative) subject” (Ruberg 2019, p. 7). The gravitational center of the term for queer game studies converges around players’ and game makers’ “longing to ‘live life otherwise’” (Ruberg 2019, p. 7), as Ruberg puts it. This approach sees queerness as predominantly negative, a critical perspective that one might trace most directly perhaps to Lee Edelman’s (2004) articulation of queer anti-futurity and Halberstam’s (2011) notion of queer failure. Thus, “playing queer” (Ruberg 2019, p. 17) and “queergaming” (Chang 2017, p. 15) both center the logics and affects of refusal, failure, and resistance, where games and players reject dominant forms of play. Queerness disrupts normativity in time and space; it scrambles the orderliness of heteronormative notions of happiness and success; it rejoices in failure, stalling, and breaking things. Yet, while such an approach challenges conceptions of the

normative and acceptable, it does little to destabilize the human subject itself, and it paradoxically reinscribes the queer subject's agency through the choice to refuse the customary logics of play.

The notion of queer playfulness I build towards in this article sees 'queer' as something 'softer,' perhaps; more vulnerable, less certain about itself. It relies more closely on the work of queer historian Zoya Street (2017) and queer game maker and scholar Mattie Brice (2017), for whom 'queer' signifies a relationality that is first and foremost humble about its agency. For Street, "instead of attempting to organize every media experience into tidy categories of 'normative' or 'subversive,'" queerness hesitates, lingering in "the strange, private experiences people have when testing the boundaries of a liminal space" (2017, p. 41). This approach posits a queer subjectivity that is uncertain about its own status, willing to negotiate it in relation to Others, and which hesitates before classifying players or player experiences as queer or straight. Meanwhile, Brice (2017) advocates for a play experience inspired by kink, in which the player becomes the submissive who willingly submits to the pleasure of the domme (the game designer or the game). For Brice, playfulness is the mutually pleasurable relationship between dominant (game) and submissive (player) wherein the player opens their subjectivity up for exploration through the game—a highly vulnerable position. As Brice recognizes, in such play "there isn't pleasure without trial, without going through consensual pain" (2017, p. 79). For both scholars, the primary affective categories activated by queer playfulness are love, pleasure, vulnerability, and hesitation, which do not presume to subvert the larger structure itself as much as they challenge the centrality and stability of the playing ego.

Gravitating towards an understanding of 'queer' as less about resistance and failure and more about a willing subjection to vulnerable, ambiguous pleasure allows us to investigate how games can queer intersubjective relations between humans and nonhumans to dream up new, less ego-centric and human-centric modes of being. The games I examine here build towards such new modes by displacing the confidence of the human subject in itself in favor of a more capacious, vulnerable, equitable, and loving form of sociality—among people who may or may not see themselves as queer, or who may or may not be people. This move constitutes not a departure from the main drifts of queer game studies, but rather a shift of emphasis toward the utopian dimensions of queer theory—towards those which draw from José Estebán Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2019) and towards the question in Halberstam's own work of the "conditions" under which "new life" can "be imagined, inhabited, and enacted" (2017, p. 190). How do games like *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* and *Digital: A Love Story* imagine forms of such a "new life" (Halberstam 2017, p. 190)? How do they enable forms of playfulness that allow players to explore through their own bodies and subjectivities what such life might look and feel like?

All of this is not to claim that queer game studies has been silent about nonhumans. To the contrary: cyborgs, robots, aliens, animals, and other nonhumans play important roles in queer game scholars' analyses of queer affects and experiences in gaming. For Ruberg, the octopus passing for a suburban dad in *Octodad* (Young Horses 2010) or the alien in *Consentacle* (Clark 2014) are characters that enable play with difference and specifically with difference of a queer sort (Ruberg 2019, pp. 85, 127). But in reading these figures allegorically, as stand-ins for diversity, passing,

and sexual fluidity, Ruberg centralizes the perspectives of queer human subjects who may recognize their experiences in the act of play. This explains why Ruberg worries about “queerness tourism” (2019, p. 18), where non-queer players might play queerness as a form of spectacle or entertainment. Likewise, when Derek Burrill invokes Donna Haraway’s (2000) cyborg as central to queer understandings of games, he privileges the dimensions of the cyborg that represent “embodied difference” (Burrill 2017, p. 28) as opposed to the posthumanity that lies at the heart of Haraway’s own project. While these and similar scholarly approaches are valuable for understanding the queerness of games, they leave the concept of the agentive human subject largely intact. In order to use queer theory to decenter the human and destabilize the position of the playing subject vis-à-vis its objects, we need to examine forms of playfulness whose queerness lies in their vulnerability to renegotiation by nonhuman Others. As my analysis of *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* and *Digital: A Love Story* shows, such a posthuman approach to queer playfulness embraces a dialectical understanding of the pain- and pleasure-suffused relationships between fundamentally alien subjects (queer, plant, and computer); it foregrounds the pleasure of an unassimilable Other, decentering the playing subject and their own pleasure.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, then, these games invite a queer playfulness that makes possible the dream of loving relationships between humans and nonhumans without assimilating Otherness into frameworks of the known.

### **Playful Plants in *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly***

*Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* (Marcotte and Squinkifer 2017) deconstructs a central tenet of gameplaying: the notion that, whether a game is perceived as labor or fun, gaming yields rewards for the player—or, more accurately perhaps, that it is the player who reaps rewards from playing. Apostrophized as “an ASMR plant dating simulator” (Shake That Button n.d., n.pag.) by its creators, this game sets up as its putative goal the accomplishment of successful love between the player and their love object, a houseplant. But *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* provides no way for actually achieving this goal. Instead of dating simulators’ usual clear mechanisms for how to win over the player’s love interest through demarcated acts of courtship, this game presents the player with no instructions about what to do or how to approach the plant; moreover, the plant’s reactions offer no indication of whether the player might be closer to achieving their goal. Indeed, *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* undoes the notion that play, especially amorous play, is goal-oriented: instead, the game sets up play and desire as amorphous, tentative, and fluid. While this “goal-less-ness” (Ruberg 2019, p. 114) aligns neatly with the process that Ruberg calls “de-gamification” (2019, p. 122) and which they consider an important aspect of many queer games, *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* goes further than merely enabling humans to play differently: rather, the game also deconstructs the central position that the human subject occupies in Western conceptions of love and pleasure. *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* firmly refuses the gratification of the player and shifts its focus instead to the enjoyment of the player’s Other: the plant.

*Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* is a game without a screen: distributed as a set of codes and instructions on GitHub (Squinky 2018), the game can be set up at home using an electric circuit, a house plant fitted with a copper wire and a nail in the soil, an Arduino board, and the program coded by Marcotte and Squinkifer. Once the

game has been thus compiled, the player can navigate it using their hands rather than a controller: they can touch or caress the house plant, which, activating the electric circuit, triggers the playback of various prerecorded sounds (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Thus, the game creates the impression that the plant responds with sound—poems, mumbling, whispering, ASMR—to the caresses of the player. No objective becomes apparent: the sounds do not move towards a climax and no teleological narrative development takes place. The game cannot be won or lost; the player cannot reap a reward. All they can do is caress the plant and await its response.



*Figure 1: Gameplay video of Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly (Squinkifer 2017).*



*Figure 2: Gameplay video of Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly (Squinkifer 2017).*

As is perhaps immediately apparent, then, *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* forces the player to relinquish the type of control that dating simulators typically afford. While actual dating is difficult because other people are unknown and unpredictable, dating simulators offer solace from these vicissitudes through clear-cut paths to victory: acts such as buying gifts or flowers or giving compliments increase the player's score and make their love interest regard them with increasing favor. That is, the player knows what their objective is—to achieve enough points that the love interest will agree to be their partner and/or have sex with them—and they also know what they have to do in order to accomplish that objective. Indeed, Juul (2005, pp. 35–36) has argued that games valorize certain outcomes and establish rules by which players should attempt to achieve them and Jaako Stenros (2016) shows that most scholars consider such goals part and parcel of the definition of a game—even though some games do leave open the possibility not to pursue the game's goal (Juul 2007). *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly*, however, does not even present the player with a goal at all. The instructions that come with the game code on GitHub only describe how the game is to be set up, not how it should be played. And while the title suggests that the plant might constitute the love object in a dating simulator, and the electric circuit and game code might imply that the plant should be touched, there is no game-intrinsic motivation for touching it—other than the childlike exploratory curiosity to find out what happens if you do.

By leaving it fully up to the player to decide how they should approach the plant, the game paradoxically limits the extent of the player's control. Although the player enjoys the radical freedom of being able to do anything they want, their sense of control is simultaneously hampered by the fact that they have no rules to guide them. Indeed, *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* throws into question the role of rules for gaming, a discussion that has been at the heart of game studies scholarship from the field's inception. For example, Ian Bogost (2016) argues that arbitrary limitations are what make games fun. That Marcotte and Squinkifer's game militates against rules works to show that the types of fun that rules help establish constrict how pleasure may be experienced and who may experience it. Thus, the player's sense of uncertainty, lack of control, and even anxiety caused by the game's deregulated environment is precisely the point: pleasure should not be the player's due if this forecloses or takes attention away from the pleasure of the plant. That is, the game does not so much advocate for Ruberg's alternative notion of "no fun" (2019, p. 159) as that it makes pleasure more malleable and uncertain than simple gratification in order to leave intact the possibility of pleasure for the player's Other, the plant.

That the player's approach of the plant should be experienced as tentative and uncertain is emphasized by the lack of a controller with which to operate the game. Marcotte (2018) has written about the theoretical implications of game controllers—how they privilege notions of mastery, masculinist prowess, and able-bodiedness. Indeed, their very designation—controller—suggests that their main function is to guarantee the player's subject position as the one around whom the game revolves and who directs the game. And although some games organize controller hardware into a "clitoral structure" (Phillips 2017, p. 118), most controllers typically allot "in-game agency to phalluses" (Bagnall 2017, p. 141). In place of controllers, then, Marcotte theorizes queer operational devices whose design refuses the idea of mastery and which allow non-hegemonic subject positions to engage with games rather than control them. It is this type of operational device that *Rustle Your Leaves*

*to Me Softly* offers. The game dispenses with a controller entirely: instead, the player navigates—or, rather, explores—the game using their hand. This design choice eroticizes the hand (or whatever body part the player chooses) as an alternative to the phallus, but it also removes human-centric scripts around amorous encounters. Thus, *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* destabilizes human (hetero)sexual norms around sex and enables an alternative, queer form of play where no participant is in control.

More importantly, however, Marcotte and Squinkifer's game not only forces the player to relinquish control over the encounter but also to accept that the game is not about their subjectivity at all. Dating simulators typically revolve around the player's amorous pleasure: the clearly defined objective—obtaining the player's love interest—promises as reward feelings of triumph or sexual gratification. But *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* offers no such gratification. The plant's sound responses are not particularly erotic by human standards: its mumbling and whispering is more soothing than seductive. Indeed, its resemblance to ASMR—which, depending on one's taste, may help achieve a relaxed, meditative state—means that the plant is less likely to trigger amorous excitement than a lazy sense of comfort. That is, neither arousal nor accomplishment are responses that the game provides for the player: instead, like in Brice's kink-based game design, the game asks the player to submit to the wiles of a dominant Other—except that here, that Other is envisioned not as the human game designer, but as a fully unknowable plant.

How the plant feels about all of this is a difficult question—and this difficulty is central to the queer playful politics of Marcotte and Squinkifer's game. The plant's only form of 'expression' is the sound that it emits in response to the player's caresses (and, to be sure, this is a fictional form, just as much as the computer-programmed love interests in dating simulators are also not real subjects with the ability to express themselves). From these sounds, it is difficult for the player to divine whether the plant perceives the caresses as erotic. Thus, the plant and its emotional world remain mysterious. Unlike the typical dating simulator's love object, whose reactions to the player's advances are transparent, the plant remains fully Other, its experience unassimilable to the world of the human player. The player cannot know how the plant is to be approached; and having approached it, they do not learn whether they are doing the right thing or the best thing from its point of view. The game leaves the plant's Otherness fully intact: human interest in it does nothing to integrate it into a human lifeworld.

Yet, although the player does not get a handle on the plant or learn what it is thinking or feeling, the soft murmur, the rustling leaves, and the other ambient sounds are certainly evocative of pleasure. The player's experience, then, is that of listening to another being's enjoyment—though an enjoyment that is difficult to categorize in amorous terms. If anything, the player might feel that this is a pleasure that resides both beyond human experience and yet somehow simultaneously at its deepest core. It is the sheer pleasure of touch between different beings—similar to the pleasure of the plant's roots coming in contact with the water they are gathering up from the soil during rain; or similar to the pleasure of trees, as humans might presume them to have, in communicating with each other. In other words, the plant's soundscape in response to the human player's touch is elusive; although it is clearly the expression of some kind of enjoyment, that enjoyment lies beyond our human knowledge and



beyond our language. Through it, *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* opens up the imagination to the possibility of new, utopian notions of what pleasure might mean. Play, when queered through the displacement of the masculinist gamer-subject and his project of conquest and control, produces an alternative form of pleasure that exists for the Other and not for the self—that imagines the joyful coexistence of human and nonhuman in the enjoyment of touch. This is the radical possibility of posthuman queer playfulness in *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly*: when the player submits to being the object of play—to being renegotiated, displaced, used for the pleasure of the Other—there emerge possibilities for a utopian sociality based on queer love that does not seek to assimilate or reduce the Otherness of different beings.

### ***Digital: A Love Story: To Live, Play, and Desire in Computer Worlds***

Where *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* displaces the player as the subject of play, *Digital: A Love Story* (Love 2010) examines the queer forms of longing that arise when human subjectivity becomes entangled in computer systems through play. Computer-mediated play exposes the subject to vulnerability and contingency, and it is this destabilized subject position that enables strange, queer forms of desire between humans and computers. The game's main gambit is to entangle the player in a digital environment that simultaneously disorients and disempowers them while also arousing powerful affects of desire.

*Digital: A Love Story* is a single-player offline “computer mystery/romance” (Love n.d., n.pag.) by Christine Love, released for Windows, Mac, and Linux in 2010. In the game, it is 1988 and the player's character is an aspiring computer user who has just received their first computer, which runs on an “Amie Workbench,” a fictional operating system resembling in both name and appearance the real-world AmigaOS, whose first version was released in 1985.<sup>2</sup> Included with the Amie is a dialer that allows the player-character to access bulletin board systems (BBSs) through which emails from other characters can be received. The central storyline involves such an email exchange between the player and the mysterious \*Emilia, which quickly develops into an amorous correspondence but is interrupted by the game's second main conflict: we learn that \*Emilia is actually an AI and that she and her kin have been targeted by a dangerous global virus. The player's character must now use all their computer skills to hack code and figure out a way to save \*Emilia and the other AIs.

While the plotline is thus relatively straightforward, the game complicates its experience by blurring the lines that demarcate human subject (player) and computer object (game). A first way this is achieved is through what Astrid Ensslin and Alice Bell have described as “interactional metalepsis” (2021, p. 49), through boundary-crossing contact between the game-world and the player. In narrative theory, the term ‘diegesis’ denotes the world (time and space) in which a story unfolds: the diegetic world of a text is thus set apart from the world of the reader, and metalepsis occurs when these boundaries are crossed (Genette 1980). Games usually allow the player to participate in the diegetic world vicariously through the player-character through “intersubjective construction” (Schröter and Thon 2014, p. 41), which does not equate player and player-character. For example, in *Grand Theft Auto V*

(Rockstar North 2013), the player plays *as*, but does not become, the game's protagonists, Michael, Franklin, and Trevor. The game's interface separates diegesis from the player's world as the player animates the characters by pressing buttons on the PlayStation joystick, not by actually stealing cars or shooting. Of course, as Annika Waern elaborates, it is possible for characters' experience to "bleed" (2011, p. 239) into the real-world player's experience: the player might well feel the character's emotions. But player and character do not inhabit the same world and the same body: they are separated through the materiality of the game, and this separation, as Burrill (2010) has shown, is fundamental for the construction and experience of playing.

By contrast, in *Digital: A Love Story*, the diegetic world in which the player-character moves and the interface that the player uses fully overlap. As the game begins, the player-character receives a computer and boots it up; likewise, the player opens up a new game and begins navigating the Amie OS; the Amie asks both to give themselves a name (see Figure 3). This naming act effectively identifies the player and the player-character as the same person, while the act of typing asks the player to perform the exact actions of the player-character, not its metaphorical substitutes. In *Digital: A Love Story*, then, the player is not playing *at* being the protagonist: they *are* the protagonist. Having become the game's protagonist, the player is quickly ensnared in the driving force of the game's plot: desire for \*Emilia. Although it is difficult to generalize about player experiences, it is possible to surmise from exchanges on gaming forums that players do typically form strong attachments to \*Emilia (Gillen 2010; Xhdxr 2010). Such attachments can be explained by the characteristics of \*Emilia's emails: she comes across as both hesitant and yet attentive to the player, resulting in a tantalizing mixture of interest and shyness (see Figure 4 and Figure 5).

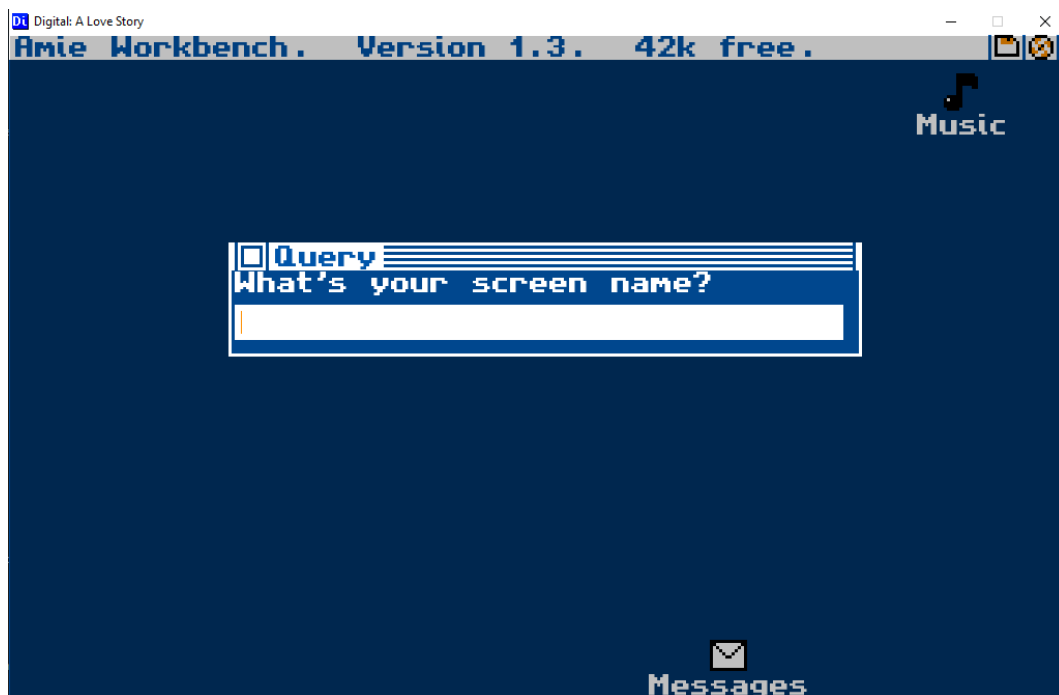


Figure 3: The opening screen of *Digital: A Love Story* (2010).

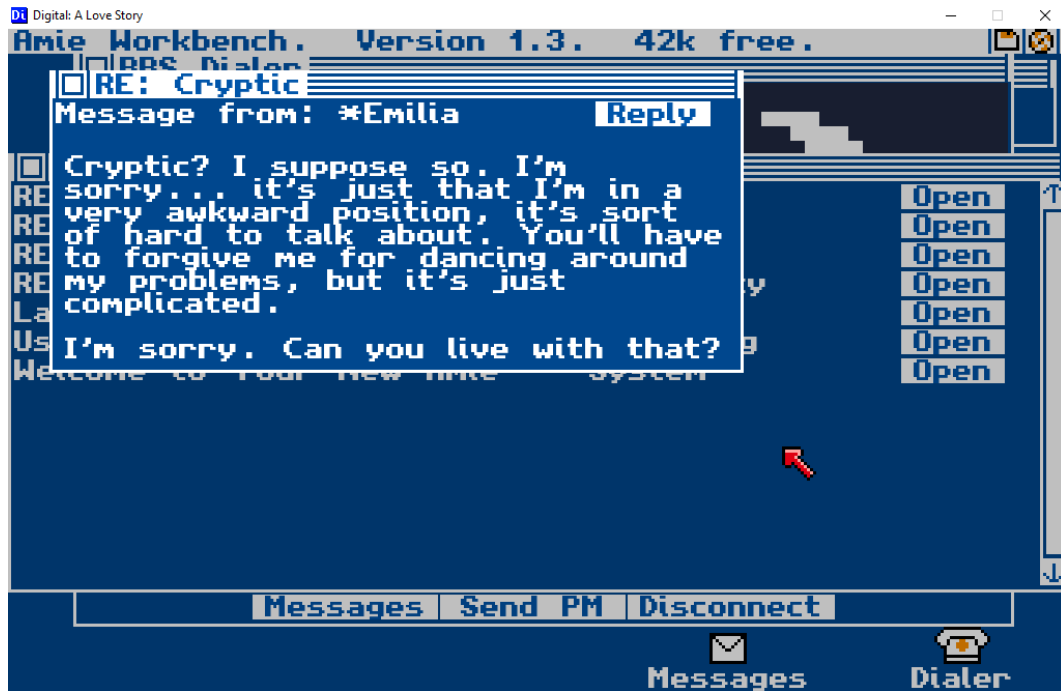


Figure 4: One of \*Emilia's messages in Digital: A Love Story (2010).

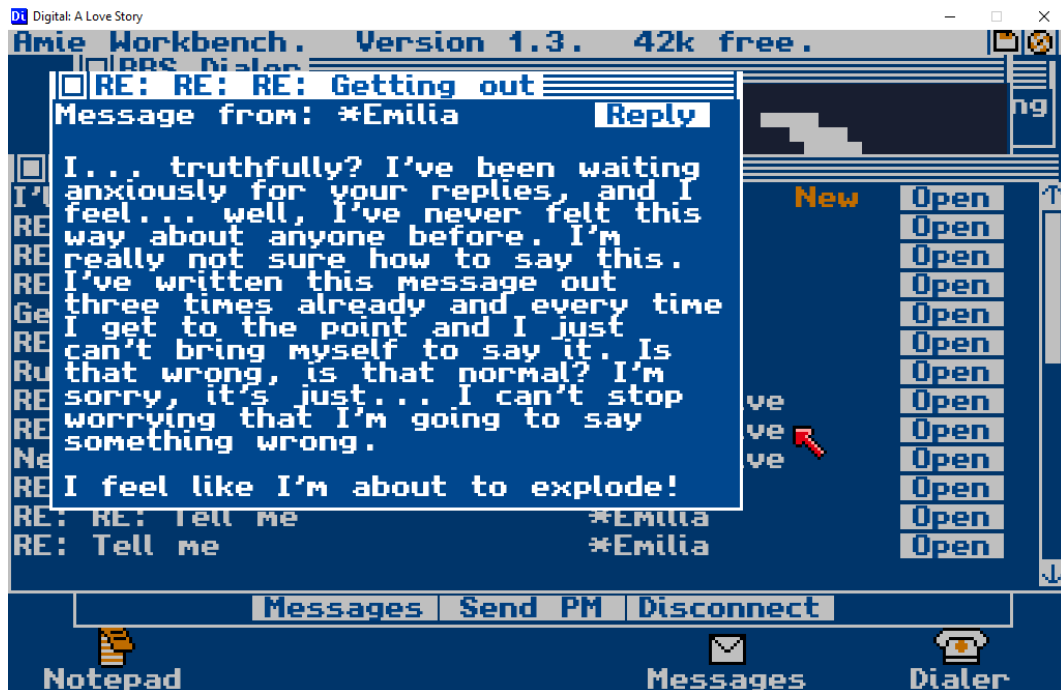


Figure 5: Another one of \*Emilia's messages in Digital: A Love Story (2010).

The delicate balance that \*Emilia strikes between divulging glimpses of her growing affection and being reticent about revealing her identity is familiar to many players as a key driver in both mystery and romance plots. To queer players, though, the playful vacillation between self-revelation and self-shielding will also be familiar from BBSs or queer dating in general, where sexual identities and desires are often

simultaneously disclosed and hidden, since they might be neither obvious nor safe (Correll 1995; Harrison 2010). Thus, in making the player (re)experience such dynamics, *Digital: A Love Story* effectively invites the player, even if they are straight or cisgender, to live through a queer computer-mediated desire.

Yet, while the desire *Digital: A Love Story* produces for the player is thus already queer in a human sense, its humanity is radically questioned when \*Emilia is revealed to be an AI. Differently from non-ludic computer-mediated spaces such as chat forums, where participants form attachments to digital fictions invented and performed by other humans, there is no human 'behind' \*Emilia: she is not an avatar for an existing person. In developing feelings for \*Emilia, the player literally falls in love with a computer. Of course, one might object that \*Emilia is just a fiction and desiring her is therefore of the same order as being attracted to a fictional character in a novel. But this argument does not account for, first, that even fictional characters tend to be flesh-and-blood people within the storyworld, while \*Emilia is not; and second, that the player *is* the protagonist of Love's game and therefore assumes ontological presence within the diegesis in a way that readers of a novel do not. Thus, when \*Emilia directs her advances towards the player specifically—using the screen name that the player initially provided—the reader is addressed by an entity comprised entirely and solely of text on a computer screen. Thus, in developing feelings for \*Emilia, what the player falls in love with are the dynamics of computer-mediated communication—of seemingly human beings produced through the textual machinations of artificial intelligence.

If the object of love in *Digital: A Love Story* is the digital itself, that environment is strikingly bare, even alienating. Indeed, next to the playful exploration of human-computer love, the game also builds a phenomenology of isolation and helplessness, which deconstructs techno-futurist dreams of overcoming human frailty through computer prosthetics. The game environment, though rendered in a beautifully nostalgic 1980s low-resolution interface, offers stultifyingly limited avenues for action. At first there is a single available action: checking "Messages." Although later new applications become available (a dialer, a Notepad, a code dictionary) and the player gains access to new BBSs as well, the game never offers much to do. Indeed, most of the gameplay consists of the player flitting from one BBS to the next, checking to see whether new emails from particular senders have come in.

In fact, even those actions that are available in *Digital: A Love Story* are reduced to their most mechanistic versions. The player cannot actually type in the Notepad: essential information is saved automatically without the player's control. When logging in to BBSs, the player cannot use a copy-and-paste function: they must painstakingly type in the lengthy codes, without making mistakes. Most shockingly, however, the player cannot compose their emails or even see them. All they can do is select which emails to reply to by hitting a "Reply" button at the bottom of the email. The email then counts as sent, but its content never becomes visible. The recipient's reply constitutes the only opportunity for the player to attempt to divine what their own message may have been. Finally, the game's mechanism for moving the plot forward (which is to reply to specific emails) is never revealed. For this reason, the flow of the story comes to seem both slow and arbitrary, and the player's actions tedious and inconsequential. The plot becomes something that happens to the player, rather than something that they propel.

With such severe limitations on what the player can do, the gameplay experience is one of being debilitated. Randomly flitting from one BBS to the other and never knowing when, or if, anything is going to happen, the player's experience is quickly dominated by feelings of helplessness, loneliness, alienation and boredom. Juul has argued that games frequently compel us to fail painfully and repetitively before we figure out how to win (2013). But *Digital: A Love Story*'s pain is different, because 'failure' is not its operative term—not even queer failure (Halberstam 2011; Ruberg 2019, p. 94). Nor does the affect of this game match exactly Ruberg's concept of "no fun" (2019, p. 159), where players confront difficult or serious real-world problems that "[d]isappoint, [s]adden, and [h]urt" (2019, p. 158). Instead, in *Digital: A Love Story*, the feelings of helplessness come from the cognitive dissonance of wanting to save the world and just waiting for emails to come in—from pursuing a playful erotic entanglement that yields only isolation and vulnerability. Willing and playful engagement with \*Emilia and the computer world of the Amie (which, like \*Emilia, is a computer gendered female) is what produces both the player's desire and their helplessness.

So, while the digital environment of a fictive 1980s OS animates in the player queer longings for an AI, the same environment also renders them isolated, vulnerable, and frustrated. The BBSs that first set in motion the player's desire for \*Emilia are part and parcel of the same computerized domain that makes \*Emilia inaccessible and the player stultified and helpless. The affective experience of *Digital: A Love Story*, then, is of a textual/computer-coded longing whose fulfillment is as impossible as the desire itself is irresistible. That is, the game suggests that the digital environment renders all humans computer constructs and as such fundamentally Other to other humans; but also that this digital-textual condition animates playful desires to reach towards Others. The computer reduces us to text, to code; it forces us to desire and yet reckon with the Other's unassimilable alterity.

This paradoxical relationship of vulnerability and desire to life in a computer environment is how *Digital: A Love Story* models a queer, posthuman notion of playfulness. Playfulness produces its most powerful queer effects when it dislodges the security of the player's own position as a human—when it unleashes queer desires that render the subject themselves vulnerable. Playing with one's own vulnerability achieves its own, queer and compelling, joy. But this is not the joy of mastery, amorous consummation, or triumph: it is the queer pleasure of playfulness that risks the self to imagine new forms of being with Others.

## **Conclusion: Living with Plants, Computers, and Queers**

How should people engage in play without competition, mastery, and optimization? How can games animate desire without subordinating its object to the self? And how can queer forms of playfulness move beyond the centrality of the human? *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* and *Digital: A Love Story* provide grounds where these questions can be tested out through play. By invoking genre expectations around dating and mastery only to subvert them, these games displace those understandings of the human subject that undergird gamified projects of domination. At the same time, both games dislodge the human from its position of privilege: the Other—the plant, the computer—becomes the primary site of pleasure and

subjectivity, with the human player in a desiring but secondary role. Indeed, when playfulness encapsulates the player's willing subjection to the game—when the game directs the player, not the other way around—this enables humans to explore their own subjectivities as vulnerable and negotiable sites of human-nonhuman relationships.

*Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* and *Digital: A Love Story* thus deviate in meaningful ways from many games that fall under the rubric of the “queer games avant-garde” (Ruberg 2020): the principal targets of their queer interventions are not concepts like winning, linear narratives, (hetero)normative time and space, or even objectives—although they do challenge these as well. Rather, the primary object of playful dismantling in these games is the human subject itself. Playfulness in this form is queer when it, like Brice's kink, is a stance that players can adopt to willingly subject themselves to the game; further, playfulness becomes posthuman when this subjection radically dislodges the security of the self and the centrality of the human. Plants, computers, humans—all share in desire, vulnerability, pleasure, and play.

Moreover, *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* and *Digital: A Love Story* are not educational or social justice games (Wonica 2017) but rather deeply unsettling and yet wonderfully gripping experiences that result from players' willing engagement in something whose destabilizing effects they cannot anticipate. That is, these games predicate the experience of simultaneous contingency and joy on the player willingly foregoing the stability of their subjectivity without even knowing how far that process might extend. Queer playfulness, in these games, asks players to let go of the security of their selfhood and subject themselves to the pleasures and play of Others whose subjectivity remains fully unknowable. *Rustle Your Leaves to Me Softly* and *Digital: A Love Story* enable players to explore the vulnerability of their own selfhoods and the alterity of their own desires, and in so doing invite a radically accommodating stance toward the Otherness of nonhumans. What emerges in this process is a queer form of play beyond the human—a kind of game mechanics that allows players to experience themselves as the objects of play and, through this play, to begin to imagine radical new ways of living and loving—as humans, plants, and computers.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> To counter masculinist assumptions about gamers, I refer to the player as 'they.' This choice is not intended to reflect any assumptions about actual players' identity affiliations.
- <sup>2</sup> Throughout this article, I maintain a distinction between the terms 'player' and 'player-character.' I use the former to denote the actual human being who interacts with the artifact that is the game; the latter designates the fictional character or avatar that the player controls—a figure I also refer to as the protagonist. The player-character exists only within the game's world and is thus distinct from the player, although this relationship is typically complex and multi-layered (Backe and Thon 2019). Because *Digital: A Love Story* is very intentional about blurring these boundaries, I refer to both the player-character and the player as 'they' throughout my discussion of this game.