Like Stars in a Tide Pool

Explorations on Subculture, the Sona, and Places in the Internet Age

Dave Saunders

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Spring 2025

Abstract

This thesis project and paper explores the digital, internet age. Parts within explore topics of queer culture, neurodivergence, escapism, narrative storytelling, sona creation, character design, ludology, and fantasy world exploration within interactive software– all witnessed through the lens of celebration of the subcultures, micro-communities, and creations of self-exploration, self-expression of the people that populate them.

From video-game playground rumors to well-written story-beat payoffs in a blockbuster hit-– the magic of storytelling, subculture, and the subsequently formed micro-communities all go hand in hand within our contemporary internet age. All types of people inhabit these communities– people who may be trans, neurodivergent, queer, gay, or autistic; people whose everyday-life families, nations, or cultures may fail to understand or accept these identities, or may not be able to be fully "themselves" in their everyday life. By engaging in cross-cultural communities, they can find escape, joy, or even newfound acceptance in these spaces. This interplay of "belonging" and "community" within the virtual realm directly results in spaces which contain interactive artwork, or spaces that are within interactive artworks themselves– some of which go on to re-manifest physically within our world as events or places.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Ever since I was young, I was entranced by stories. Tales of mythical creatures, places long gone, worlds that only exist in the imagination, and the at-times wise real-life chronicles of company, be it older folks who had lived enough of life to advise, or a friend who needed an ear to listen. All are welcome to share a moment and reveal a part of a world beyond my own, be it real or imagined.

Fig. 1, Nintendo, Nintendo Power Issue 111, *Pokémon Poster,* Aug 1998. Print Magazine.

Around the age of four, my school class was entranced by the wave of "Pokémania" that was sweeping the nation– the term given to the newest fad: *Pokémon*. A media franchise containing primarily video-game adventures, *Pokémon* housed fantastical creatures set in a world not too different from our own, with the important addition of supernatural monsters and independent, world-traveling ten-year-olds (see fig. 1).

Living in a household where higher-tech video game products like Nintendo GameBoy or Sega were not permitted, I turned to other sources to engage with the *Pokémon* world: the cartoon anime, merchandise, films, bestiary books, and the fledgling internet. Students poured over an illustrated encyclopedia that contained information on all of the *Pokémon* designed at the time– as well as the alluring promise of additional creatures from an in-development new installment. The question of "who" and "how many" new monsters beyond the original collection captured the imagination of entire schools, as development of *Pokémon* sequels and new creatures were previously unknown to children outside of Japan beyond rumors and hearsay (Barbo 155). Although the fad began to fade, the fire within me to experience this forbidden world of a video game ensnared my imagination constantly for the next two years, which felt like an eternity to a child.

Fig. 2, Nintendo, The Pokémon Company, Game Freak LTD, *Pokémon Sapphire,* 21 Nov. 2002, Video Game Software.

A *Game Boy Advance* model and then just-released *Pokémon Sapphire* (see fig. 2) were gifted to me once I turned nine, procured by my own parents and parents of friends pooling their funds together. Although the fad had long faded, and I was considered uncool for my interest, I was ecstatic and excited to embrace the adventure awaiting me within the video game software. I could finally be a part of *Pokémon* myself,

no longer just a spectator. Part of the magic of being a pre-iPhone era child was the wonder of discovery within the software.

Fig. 3, Nintendo, The Pokémon Company, Game Freak LTD, *Pokémon Sapphire,* 21 Nov. 2002. Video Game Software.

Over three hundred unique creatures were packed into these worlds (see fig. 3), and it was common for friends to only hear rumors or names of creatures. With no pictures and no phones on which to look them up, we only had the "playground rumor" system: a system built on hazy memory, hearsay, anecdotes, and exaggeration. It was common to hear fiction mixed in with truth, such as "my uncle works for Nintendo," or "if you complete this specific menial task one-hundred times in a row, you'll encounter a one-of-a-kind mythical creature." Yet, truthful children would trade tips and "cheat codes" that, when tested, gave way to secrets that were only attainable with that knowledge in tow, bet it from true experience or game guidebooks. Secrets such as needing to learn how to read braille to awaken three elemental golems, or finding an unassuming carp that can turn into a draconic siren, by fishing in a specific yet randomized spot in a river spanning a ridiculous length. These stories were the truth among the lies, as unbelievable as it seemed. Yet these secrets were handcrafted by the game developers to facilitate that very sense of mystery and wonder, and it succeeded. (Hollinger 44, 72).

It was this playground rumor culture that made *Pokémon's* world seem more expansive than it truly was, and this boundlessness of "what if" and "just maybe" will remain in me and my art until the end of my days.

Throughout the 2010's, my personal work began to explore more themes present in furry culture– furries being people who are fans of anthropomorphic animals and animal-sonas, and some furries are people who create or share media that contains those types of characters. As I was familiar with the *My Little Pony* and *Pokémon* fandom subcultures, I wanted to understand how they overlapped and evolved from the larger, parent furry subculture and fandom, especially since the concepts of anthropomorphism, animation, gaming, and gender cross paths so often in these fandoms (*The Power To Catch 'Em All,* 85). Later, in 2023, during the second year of my MFA program, I was working well past nightfall alongside my mentor in a Starbucks, as she reviewed her students' thesis papers. Amidst the breaks between our individual work, we would switch gears to co-editing eachother's articles for an art history class we took together as a form of avoiding burnout on a single task. The topic of my own eventual thesis was brought up, as well as my love of game design, so she suggested I take the same concepts I explore in my outside-of-academia video game *KIMAERA* (see fig. 4), and interweave them into the concepts of my professional academic studies. During this time, I had been dipping more into understanding and studying subcultures, including those of furries, video game storytelling, and self-expression. Her suggestion was for me to unite my loves of subculture, gaming, and storytelling within an academic setting. As she spoke, she gestured at my recent, self-motivated explorative works of gender celebration, furry-esque character design, and my passion for fictional narrative. She stated without hesitation: "That is your thesis, right there! That's what your thesis *is*."

Fig. 4, DavoGato & The KIMAERA Team, *Shanty Studios LLC, KIMAERA* beta, 12 Feb. 2025, Indie PC Game, Video Game Software.

Little by little, cafe meeting after cafe meeting from that point on, we worked together and hashed out details regarding our own thesis ideas– her focus on the metaphysical and literal meanings of walls, barriers, and separations– and mine on explorations of my passions with a new lens. As the autumn season turned to winter, we were both busy as ever, and we set meetings aside to focus on work and careers, planning to resume our workshopping in the summer. She passed before the upcoming summer could arrive. I write, design, and create all of the elements of *Like Stars in a Tide Pool* keeping her and many loved ones I have lost along my journey, in my heart and my mind.

Influences and Context

Foundations

Being a trans-umbrella, queer individual myself, I've found immense joy and freedom in embracing sona-culture and exploring both online and offline communities. Emphasizing this love within my work in these past few years has produced a new direction for me– art with a focus on kindred people who are stigmatized or misunderstood, and are

building communities together and connecting, despite it all. Yet, there was a time when I felt differently toward showcasing my own self-expression.

Back in 2011, gaming press was ablaze with a new release, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. Although I was interested in the game, I couldn't play it at the time due to lacking the up-to-date machines of Sony, Microsoft, or any PC hardware that *Skyrim* would run on. Years after the hype died down, I purchased a console that could run it, and was able to procure a copy of *Skyrim* by 2014. As physical materials and merchandise of the game had gone down in price, I picked up a written game guide to assist me on my better-late-than-never journey. Within the fantasy world of *Skyrim*, a Viking-medieval magic-using dragon-slaying game, the player is free to do many sidequests or non-story activities, including marrying certain pre-allowed computer characters (Yin-Poole). Ranging from young bachelor hunters to wiser golden-year mages, all these choices are fair game to marry and start families with, leading to routes of life such as housing, adoption, pets, and owning businesses. The player can marry any of the eligible adults– regardless of what type of humanoid you are, or what kind of gender pairing would occur. As the 2013 officially sanctioned *Skyrim* guidebook boldly proclaims, "Your gender, age, and race matters not: If you're attracted to someone, go out and catch their hearts!" (*Skyrim Prima Guide,* 423). This was my first experience ever encountering something like this in gaming. The creators had built, allowed, and even endorsed a concept that resonated with me so strongly; a secret self that I was once certain would doom me to damnation; something that I was ashamed of, but secretly felt true joy partaking in. There was true freedom in seeing non-traditional marriages normalized in global media, especially in video games. Secretly, when no one was in the room with me, I spent time on the game courting eligible folks. This ended with me wedding my masculine dragon-lizard mage character, Dav'o, to another dragon-lizard man, Scouts-Many-Marshes. We moved to a lake-view manor I had previously built, piece by piece over the course of my time in *Skyrim*. I hid the fictional, harmless in-game relationship from my real-life family. Although my family had known I wasn't straight, they were fearful of my persecution and were clearly dismayed by the topic. I was still publicly in the closet, and I felt shame from having a fictional male partner– in fear of betraying the cultural expectation of straightness from my world and

the fear from my family. In late June of 2015, others would share in my catharsis as same-sex marriage was declared legal– our country moved a step closer to the life I yearned for, no longer mere fantasy.

Fig. 5, Bethesda Game Studios, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim,* Nov 2017, Nintendo Switch Version, Video Game Software. Screenshot taken by Dave Saunders.

Then in 2017, Nintendo finally was able to run a reworked version of *Skyrim* on their hardware. Within this new version, I mirrored my original quest– having Dav'o marry Marshes without hesitation. Full of pride for one's self, the moment was beheld as it should have always been, fearlessly and proudly on the living room television. All while my family remained unfazed and unbothered as they did their own leisure activities in the same room. In that moment, my fictional life– and my real-world identity– finally felt (and always should have been seen as) normal (see fig. 5).

Each character and environment present within *Like Stars in a Tide Pool* is emblematic of a similar celebration, designed to echo and amplify the same feelings as the USA's same-sex legalization, and wedding of Dav'o and Marshes; elements of queerness, identity, gender, and genuine love stitched into every aspect. As a queer creator, I imprint these traits on things I make, naturally and subconsciously. This time, I've

chosen to add even more intent behind this inclusion. By building normalcy and inviting audiences in at whatever level they're at currently, I seek to showcase the true nature of these people. I insist, and portray, that "they're human, too." Within this lens, I've designed each character to mirror real groups of people and be inspired by real stories. These narratives shown through sonas and characters-– existing in quiet, intimate moments, allow more integration of concepts such as embracement, anthropomorphism, and domestic tenderness in a way that's more digestible, rather than heavy-handed or patronizing.

Like Stars in a Tide Pool exists to celebrate the diversity, passion, beauty, and creativity of a strong group of "different" people, from all sorts of walks of life, inviting audiences to witness what makes these individuals truly themselves. Be it as a resident of these themes or a curious visitor, all are welcome to attend with the hope they will deepen their understanding of themselves.

Identity and Artwork

A subject intertwined with art and artistry is the whole mechanism regarding one's own identity. Dating back to the mere concept of mark-making and leaving traces to say, "We were here, and here is who we were," this concept of identity and how it imprints on human creations is integral to the human experience. These works may be created for record, for innovation, or for intrinsic purpose (Kubler 28, 56). The innate human need to state and record, coupled with the sense of self in humanity leads to artworks and expressions of self in creative endeavors. These contain portions of the creator, ranging from metaphysical fingerprints all the way to an emblematic mirror of the individual and a portion of their ideals and true essence, all within the form of the artwork. Living in a modern age, the ability to look back on time, records, and cultural evolution lets us catalog factors that have shaped our own identities and the identities of those who came before. Influences of all types, associations, and magnitude shape each person and graft onto their own selves, becoming integral to the newer-moulded identity in the process. These influences can reach far back into our youth, our inner selves, and our most vulnerable aspects. These can then be examined, rethought, or delicately

observed and understood to help us move forward in our own growth. (*The Deepest Well,* 218).

I see questions between the lines of our current age: how has gender expression evolved in the modern age, and what role does queer culture play in shaping our understanding of gender and sexuality?

Within these larger online communities and subcultures, these kindred humans build micro-communities and connect over similar interests–- sometimes using alter-egos, or "sonas" (short for persona[s]), a character or avatar designed to represent or reflect an individual. Others may engage through the role of being a storyteller or an author, making stories populated with original characters instead, containing overarching plotlines, fictional histories, and carefully curated worlds. There are individuals who do both, neither, or one or the other. Sometimes, the sona is treated as inseparable from the person who "is" the sona: it is the other side to the "human" coin. Echoes of "sona", "furry", and "anthropomorphic creatures" (anthro for short) reverberate through art history from Neolithic sculpture and painting, to non-western gods and legends, all through to the era of internet age; with a new emphasis on the convergence of all these interwoven topics within the perspective of "today."

I've watched as subcultures I've followed all my life morph in real-time from grade-school rumors and media affinity into passionate fully-grown folks interacting with dedicated micro-communities. And as the people of each community created sonas, they would grow from mere characters into proper second selves, inseparable from the flipside "human" identity, the sona now one with the person they are.

Identity, artwork, and storytelling are all part of these micro-communities, which are places marginalized people are often found: found creating, flourishing, and being seen as their true selves, alongside others of similar identities or shared interests.

Explorations on the Self, the Sona, and Identity

Fandoms, simply put, are communities formed around enjoyers of a certain thing– be it a piece of media, a series, or a lifestyle (*CAPE* 59; *Furscience* 7). Fandoms and fans exist for anything and everything, but not everything is *referred* to as a fandom– fans of sports, fans of cooking shows, and fans of comics are great examples (we say "sports fan", person who "watches" cooking shows, or someone who "reads" comics). Furthermore, it's possible to be a fan of something and not participate in "the fandom": some folks choose to enjoy subjects without the presence of outsider opinion, content, or influence– be it from a fandom or any other fans altogether. Some people dislike being referred to as a member of fandom, due to the stigma and issues regarding bad actors, stereotypes, societal judgment, or personal reasons– while some people embrace the fandom terminology as it can provide a sense of community. Fandoms exist in all sizes, and can have subsets and sub-communities– and fandoms can have such diverse opinions and members that it's impossible to make generalizations about fandoms or their overarching umbrella cultures as a whole. For example, you have "gamer" culture– a quasi-fandom, then a more specific branch: such as Nintendo-published games. Going deeper, there's a fandom for Nintendo's *Super Mario* game series, and within that there's those who only enjoy a very specific *Super Mario* title– and there are fans who have unique feelings, likes, dislikes, and opinions about individual aspects about that exact title, even within that microculture! And within that, we find the minute that makes up micro-communities: those who enjoy the art, those who race each other to complete the game as quickly as possible, those who learn how the game was built, those who play for fun– it's all there, infinitesimal yet wondrous, comparable in divisibility to history, ecology, or biology.

Despite not being a requirement, for some the appeal of fandom culture is in fashion– manifesting as cosplay. Cosplay is a portmanteau of "costume play", an activity wherein an individual dons wearable art– be it the clothes, accessories, or outfit representing, matching, or inspired by character from their own work, a fandom, a subculture, or a media franchise. This can range from custom clothing, pre-purchased parts, props, swords, shoes, buttons, bags, masks, and everything in between. Cosplays can be made on the cheap or cost thousands of dollars. Components can range from felt and

cardboard all the way to integrated circuits and custom PCBs– there is unending complexity and nuance, yet it's all valid cosplay. As of writing this in 2024, the general consensus I've seen toward cosplaying is that any person can cosplay any character, regardless of the cosplayer's body, age, gender, or background, through outfit and outfit alone. However, I am unsure if this will remain the consensus. With a fragmented media landscape and poor education on cultural appropriation, cases of racial appropriation in cosplay continue to happen through the occasional, yet persistent, bad actors– problems like white cosplayers using blackface (or full on blackface body paint), textured hair wigs, and accent stereotypes still occur to this day, and it's hard to say how consensus on "anyone can cosplay anything" will reshape and evolve with this unfortunate and persistent problem.

Fig. 6, Left; Anthony Borno (@anthony_rborno), *Rice Garden 2025 - Pikmin S.S. Dolphin Ship Part Gijinka Cosplay Group Photo*, 2025, Photograph. Right; Nintendo, The Matching *Ship Parts, Breadbug* Creature*, and Ship Part List* Screen from *Pikmin*, 2001*.* Nintendo Gamecube, Video Game Software. *Ship Part Renders* from *PIKMIN Olimar no Wakusei Kansatsuki Guide*, scanned via users at *Pikipedia*, *the Pikmin Wiki.*

Other forms of cosplay are less literal– gijinka, a Japanese term for a humanized object or non-human entity, thing, or concept, is a popular form of cosplay. Friends of mine created cosplays of the *Pikmin series'* space ship machine parts by turning the parts into gijinka. By reimagining the engineering, fashion, visual history, and in-game context of each ship part, they were able to create cohesive yet recognizable cosplays. This includes the cosplayer who was the literal ship part checklist itself, donning a fan-made *Pikmin*-print button up shirt *(see fig. 6, left; far right, middle row).*

Fanworks as a Whole and In Subculture

Within fandoms, artists, creators, and fans also create works (original or derivative), inspired by or set within the content the fandom is about: this can manifest as any given

artform or any of the arts as a whole. As of the time of writing, there are over 70,280 registered fandoms and over 14,500,000 collective works hosted at *Archive of Our Own (commonly abbreviated as AO3),* a popular website for fan creations, creations that fall under any category of fanwork. *AO3* hosts content of every rating and medium possible, defined as "A fan-created, fan-run, nonprofit, noncommercial archive for transformative fanworks, like fanfiction, fanart, fan videos, and podfic" by the site runners themselves (*Archive of Our Own*). Fanworks of every type are created, gifted, shared freely, posted, streamed, compiled, traded, sold, produced, and enjoyed by fandoms– with some fanworks outliving or being made long after the respective fandom has run dry of "official media" from the source.
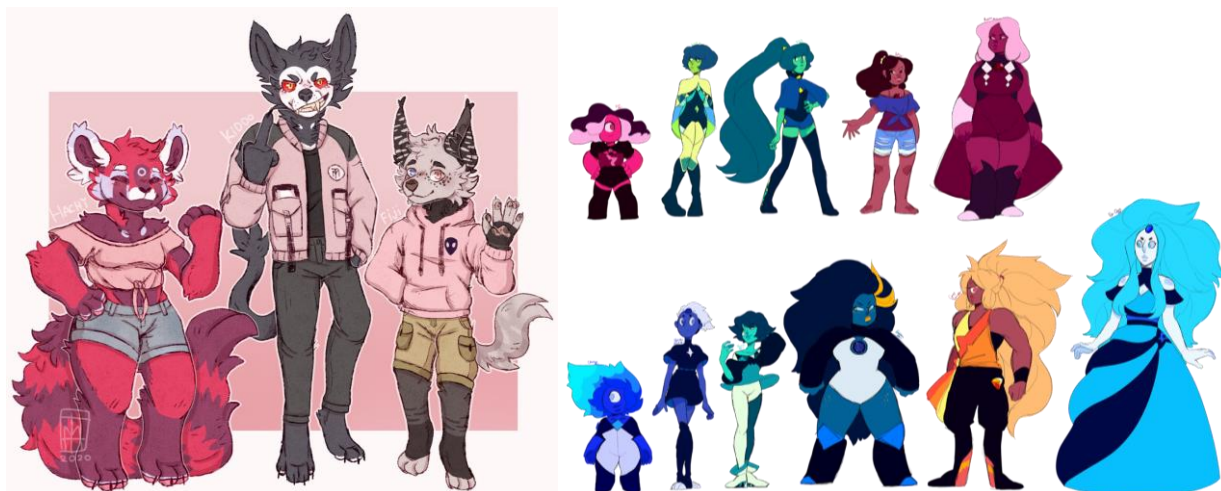

Fig. 7, Left; Twentys_Hell, *Pink Squad, 2022* via FurAffinity, digital artwork.
Right; purpleorange, *Untitled Gemsona Chart,* 2017 via Tumblr, digital artwork.

Fans, individuals who partake in fandoms, and artists of today often have fictional characters to populate their art, individual original stories, or fanworks– these are known as "original characters". An original character who is a stand-in or mirror to the individual is known as a sona. Sonas and OCs (original characters) come in many different forms, ranging anywhere from anthropomorphic animal, to talking quadruped, to mythical humanoid, and multitudes more– all serving as powerful mirrors, true expressions of the individual. OCs and Sonas can be any species (including fictional species of existing media) humans, or objects– there are no rules. Individuals may have any number of OCs or sonas. Furthermore, the suffix term -sona can be appended to whatever species

or term is used for the collective whole, such as Fursona (Furries), Pokesona (*Pokémon*) or Gemsona (*Steven Universe*'s Alien Gem Species) (see fig. 7).
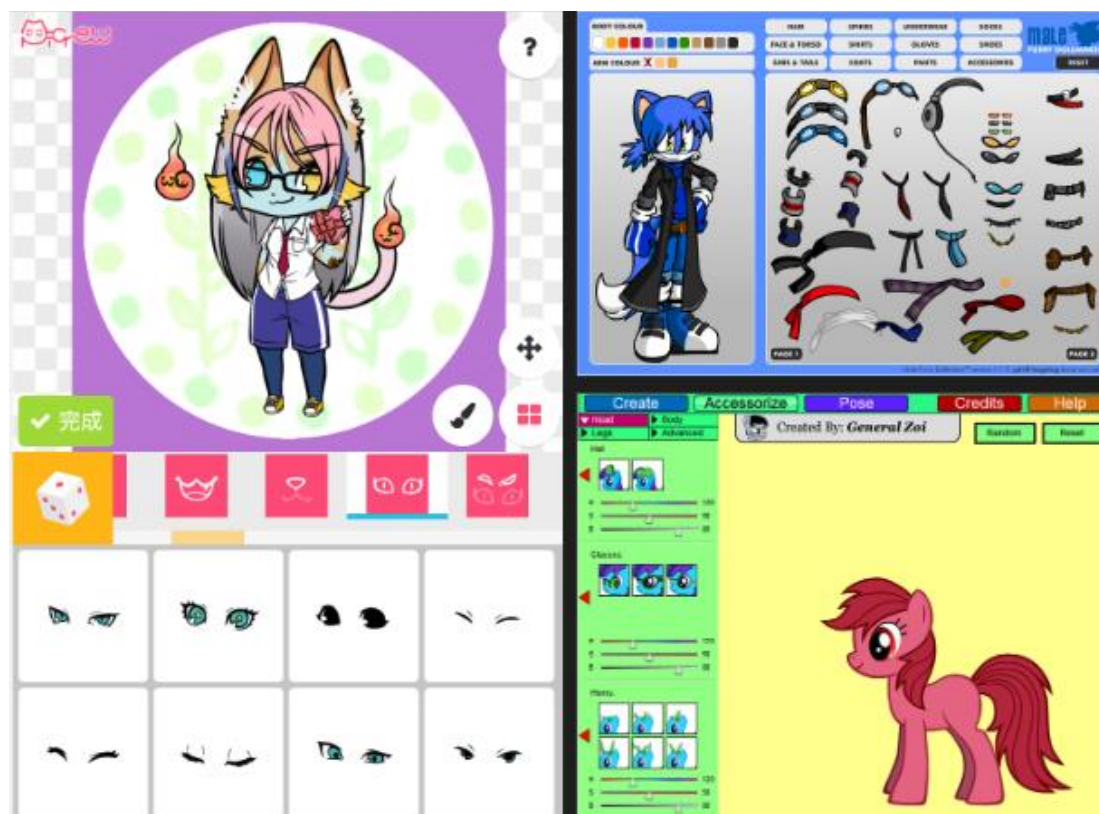
Fig. 8 Left; *Cat-based JK maker*, Hayaj/Tongari Goat, Unknown Year, Picrew App, HTML5.

Top Right; geN8hedgehog, *Furry Sonic OC Dollmaker,* 2006, DeviantART Submission, Flash.

Bottom Right; General Zoi, *Pony Creator*, 2011, DeviantART Submission, Flash. OCs and Sonas can be drawn, requested, adopted, gifted, or commissioned to be drawn by on behalf of someone else. Some OCs and sonas exist in non-visual mediums, such writing only. Artists and programmers have created tools, such as General Zoi's *Pony Creator,* to assist users in creating their own characters using templates, either as springboards for drawings or ways to feel out ideas (see fig. 8). Sonas can allow people to explore and express their interests, gender, sexuality, and creativity in new and exciting ways, often creating a sense of community and belonging in the process for sona-havers. Having a sona may ward off body dysmorphia or dysphoria, as the wielder of that sona may be uncomfortable with their current human

self or body. For many queer or queer-closeted individuals, the "sona" provides a safe and accepting space where they can fully embrace and celebrate their identity without fear of judgment or persecution.

Fig. 9, Norval Morrisseau, *Man Changing into Thunderbird,* 1977, Acrylic on Canvas.

A question still lingers: where did OCs sonas come from, and who was the first to make them? You'll get different answers depending on who you ask. Some furries point to Ken Sample, a Black artist and illustrator, as the point of popularizing fursonas with his very own fursona in the 1980's. Others argue Lisa Jennings created the first fursona in the 1980's, independently and prior to Sample's fursona. Although he wasn't a furry himself, some suggest Osamu Tezuka, who created *Kimba the White Lion* in the 1950's, as the major force behind particular "talking animal" manga taking off outside of Japan– and creating what would eventually become furries alongside it. Similar arguments can be made for Walt Disney and his works– Mickey Mouse could even be considered a fursona of Walt himself. Historically, various groups outside of Japanese-speaking and English-speaking countries feature animals and humans connected in different ways. Some of these are mythological stories or indigenous narratives: symbologies that use animals in a transformative way, such as Norval Morrisseau's, *Man Changing into Thunderbird,* which is closely tied to the artists' Anishinaabe background (see fig. 9). Even if *Man Changing into Thunderbird* is neither definitely a sona work nor furry work, it does pose a question: did OCs, furries, anthros, sonas, and storytelling as a whole all began with small, local groups of people, entirely independently across the world? (Yes) (*Furtannia XV, 1;* Kubler ix,; Hebdige 100; Foster 24).

Fig. 10, Left; Unknown Artist, *Lion-man of Hohlenstein-Stadel*, c. 33,000+ BCE, Ivory.
Photograph by Dagmar Hollmann via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.
Right; Unknown Roman Artist, *Statue of Hermanubis,* c. 100–138 AD, Marble.
Photograph by User:Colin via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0.

I feel there is no discernable clear origin of fursona, sonas, or original characters at all–
it is something that extends back past the Romans, past Ancient Egypt, past written
history: I argue it's been with humanity, present in every culture, ever since we began to
tell stories. Also, humans are animals– and although concepts of humans identifying
with animalistic traits, otherkinism, and therianism would constitute a whole separate
thesis, there's something of note in considering our origins and evolution as mammals.
And although we'll never know who made the *Lion-man of Hohlenstein-Stadel,* first
witnessed Anubis as a jackal-headed man*,* or drew a "funny animal person" hybrid, I
feel indebted to them and other artists across time whose contributions have shaped
human history, all before we had the means and records to commemorate them (see
fig. 10, fig. 11).
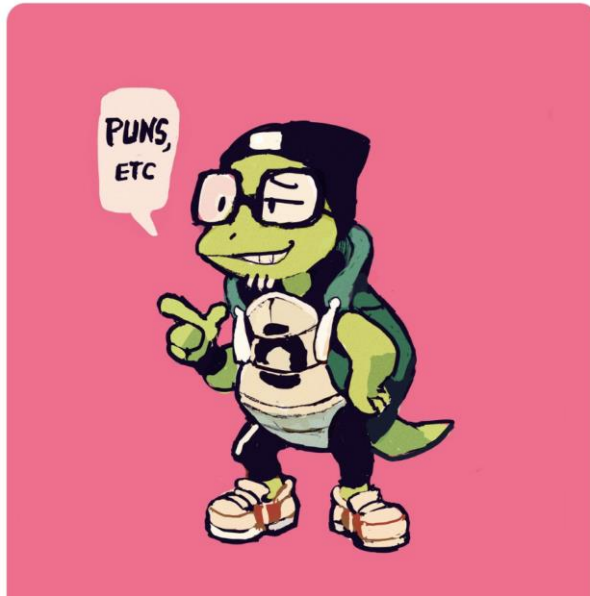
Fig. 11, Left; onemegawatt, *untitled*, 2018, via Twitter, digital artwork.
Right; Lopoddity, *Pokesona: Trash Rat,* 2016*,* via DeviantArt, digital artwork.

Deceptively, "furry" is a complex umbrella term, albeit a limiting one– topics under "furry media" can encompass all sorts of ranges. Although it's commonly seen in mainstream media that "furry" equates to one who wears a "fursuit" [fursuits being akin to mascot suits, but fashioned after furry, furry-esque, or furry-ified characters, species, creatures, or sonas), or furries being a "sex thing", this couldn't be a narrower viewpoint.

Fursuits, similar to cosplay (but uniquely different), allow the wearer to embody a character– of whom it may be their sona; similar reasons as to why echo from earlier. A majority of furries do not own, or plan to own, a fursuit (*Furry Nation; Furry Planet; Furscience 221, 313*). The furries who do own fursuits may have one modeled after a character they like from media, an original character from their own works, or a sona (see fig. 12). Fursuits can be worn for a variety of reasons, such as theatrical appeal, being more connected with a character or sona through "being them" in appearance and

shape, or just for fun! Fursuits are not a requirement nor an expectation– this has been perpetuated by the myth of furries exclusively using fursuits for sexual purposes. Although some individuals choose to utilize their fursuits in this manner, it's important to keep in mind a fursuit is a wearable piece of art– one that may cost upward of *thousands* of dollars to commission, let alone maintain, clean, and update. There are countless individual fursuit makers and larger sub-communities dedicated to maintaining, building, customizing, and innovating fursuits– some integrating technology or props to assist with things like expressions, lighting, animation, and resisting overheating for the suiter (see fig. 13).

Fig. 12, Vlad Wilkinson & Dave Saunders, *MAGfest Pokemon Cosplay Suiters*, 2024, Collaborative Photograph Collage. Left to Right: Incineroar (Pokemon, Stock), Shark-

Mudkip Sona (Pokemon & Animal Hybrid, Custom, Anthro, Sona), Sylveon (Pokemon, Anthro).

Traditionally, the term "furry" can apply to cultural-zeitgeist-level animals, animal-characters, and stories (from Mickey Mouse to *The Lion King* to *Pokémon* to *Garfield*), to real-world wearables (from everyday clothing, to cosplay, to team mascots, to fursuits)*,* all the way down to people; events, actions, or works present in their individual lives. Some people enjoy media and art featuring anthro animals, but choose not to call themselves furries.Some furries don't have sonas, and some furries don't create furry art of any medium. While furry culture as a whole leans toward being a queer-pride-positive, sex-postive hookup culture, asexual and aromantic furries exist. Although adult artworks containing elements of erotica, sexual expression, nudity, and kink content are a staple of furries having a queer-celebrational, self-expressive, and sex-positive community, there's just as many adult creators who focus on exclusively in non-sexual subjects, the sciences, or traditionally more "tasteful" subjects of art and study– both types of art coexist (*CAPE; Furry Planet; Furry World; Furscience 260; Furtannia*).

A majority of furries live lives of relative anonymity and normalcy regarding furry aspects appearing in their day to day lives. Yet, furries pop over the place in our world; IT, aircraft maintenance, medicine, indie music, software development, the arts - if you look hard enough, at least one furry will be there! All sorts of media or artwork can be designated "furry" at creation by a furry creator, be non-furry-focused despite coming from a furry creator, or be declared as something "furry-esque" by the furry community at large, regardless of origin. Much like things in the internet age or art history, the categories' boxes are hazy and there's plenty of amorphousness (*CAPE; Furry Planet; Furry World; Furscience; Furtannia*).

Fig. 13, Dave Saunders, *MAGfest Fursuiters*, 2025, Photograph.

Data shows that the furry fandom as a whole sports higher concentrations of people who are neurodivergent and/or identify as queer & LGBTIAQ2S+, a demographic higher than the general populous. This trend is something found in nearly every other subculture and fandom, with furries as a paragon; it's speculated higher inclusivity, collective shared interest, and "comfortable" third places are why this occurs! Although it's still a limited definition, I've come to the consensus that "furry" can be defined as "a person who thinks fictional talking animals are cool and neat, in some regard, and they might just also enjoy media with said fictional talking animals, in some regard, and may do so with the company of other people, who may also be furries", which is supported by data on furries, bronies, and fandoms– and cute things in general (*CAPE; Furry Planet; Furry World; Furscience 455, 493; Furtannia; The Power To Catch 'Em All;* Edwards).

Ripples on a Digital Lake: Explorations on Narrative and Modern Storytelling

Escapism, play, and mythos have all existed as elements of storytelling since humans of antiquity first told tales. Subculture, identity, and self-expression have grown alongside storytelling in human history as forms of celebration of "the self"– the expression of an individual, both solo and in communities. Both threads of storytelling and individuality meet where art resides– the ultimate act of creating something that is both new and familiar, born from a collective history of life seen from an individual perspective. The integration of the internet and the growth of interactive media within everyday-life has irrevocably changed our world and the types of art we experience within it. Individuals born or growing into a post 1980's world are finding themselves alongside global ripples of embrace: embrace of once-taboo topics of gender, sexuality, and individual expression, now finally in spaces of creatives and non-creatives alike.

Alongside the growth of the internet was the growth of the media subculture– a force that has infinite permutations and an ever-growing number of topics. All these threads in tandem meet in the nexus of storytelling: stories lived and stories shared, stories of imagination or stories of communities– connect people across distances, languages, generations, and even time itself– through each wave of interactive media, video games, films, and stories that pulse through internet subculture like waves on a tireless coastline shore. Games as a medium can be a narrative experience– they don't have to contain a competitive environment or established objective (although they can), as they can be more like a book you alter, a movie you make unfold, or a story that you can influence by choices.

In 2016, the mobile title *Pokémon GO* made its worldwide debut. In *GO,* the game world is removed in favor of a real-world, GPS-based map. Featuring landmarks, historical places, artworks, sculptures, and points of interest, *GO* motivated players to go outside and catch creatures in urban, social places– communities formed and newcomers arrived to see what it was all about. For context, the *Pokémon* titles are unique; by connecting your own machine to someone else's via a link cable or wireless connection, you could trade your collected creatures, or have one-on-one battles– strategic competitions of skill and wit. These battles, acting much like a fusion of *Dungeons and*

Dragons and *Chess*, were and still are a major allure for competitive players. Conversely, the creature collectors instead aim for the objective of finding, beholding, and cataloging every creature in the *Pokémon* encyclopedia through exploration and creature trading. Since every player has their own identical encyclopedia to complete, each and every player seeking to complete their own must encounter each pokemon themselves through various means. Every few years a new *Pokémon* encyclopedia would be included in the newest game, and encyclopedia completion was a task that required the help of additional games, hardware, and patience. Thus, teaming up with friends on the task to complete each encyclopedia all together as a team made *Pokémon* even more social and communal. The appeal of combat and trading, based in the themes of skill, wit, sharing, and co-operative goals, are motivators that persist in most modern creature-collecting games, even outside of *Pokémon* titles*. Yet, Pokémon GO* was all about one thing, at launch– not player battles, and not player trades– but instead focused solely on the encyclopedia.

Going out in the real world allowed people to meet up in real-life to begin to search locales, chipping away at each of their own *GO* encyclopedias. Players had different motivations: some players hadn't touched a *Pokémon* title since 1997, others were die-hard fans, and even newcomers joined in the hunt. Players of all ages and backgrounds were playing *GO*, and since there was no trading in *GO* at the time, it was every *Pokémon* trainer for themselves. Yet, it didn't become that way: *Pokémon GO* players worked together to create quasi-guilds, small groups, and online communities– scouting information, reporting monster locations locally or online, and doing field research to ensure the monster data was accurate. The sense of community around *GO* was comparable to a fandom, even in its infancy. Even on the analog side of things, groups of local players of nearly every age would search towns and cities for monsters as squads– it was common in the early days to run into other players at random and tackle the encyclopedia of battle challenges as helpful strangers, together. Although the buzz around *GO* has died down in the years since, a lot of those early players still partake in those communities and play even today (*The Power To Catch 'Em All*). Every so often, *GO* users cycle the remark that during the summer of 2016, *Pokémon GO* was the

"closest modern humanity has been to world peace in years"– and in some ways, they might have been right.

Video Games as Gesamtkunstwerks you can Touch and Change

As long as humans have wished to create, share, and record– ever longer have they wished to frolic, to giggle, to play. Our innate desire for logical experiences of imagination, thrill, interaction, and participation has been with humanity even before we were human, as animals such as corvids or bovines display such activities for the same purposes (*Cows Play*; Bolotnikova; Kubler; Koster; Preziosi). The conversation on play has expanded, and video games as a medium has entered the roundtable with a genuine question: are video games truly works of art? The answer is indubitably yes.

There is a term for the type of works video games fall under I utilized in this paper– Gesamtkunstwerk. A Gesamtkunstwerk being a German loanword, meaning "comprehensive artwork" or literally as "total artwork", something which I argue video games are types of (The Art Story). Video games have different and unrelated art forms as their components, and then are combined to create one unified work with one clear "packaged" identity: the game itself. Video games contain scripts, writing, programming, math, machine learning, visuals, music, camera work, graphic design, character design, fashion design– the list goes on. And what of the production? The concept artists, sound foley artists, coders, editors, texture artists, designers, producers, directors; the countless revisions to each individual unit they oversee– all of which are completely independent from those who play the game!

Viewing video games through the lens of Gesamtkunstwerk shows them as being collective artworks, experiences, performances, or as entities that combine multiple disciplines of artistry, methodology, craft, and discipline. It is the mere act of unifying multiple made-by-many-hands individual-artworks-on-their-own into one cohesive super-artwork that fulfills the criteria, and this creation bound by dispirit artforms working in cohesion is what video games inherently are built from.

The Intertwined Echoes of Software

A majority of research and data around the topic of video games as artforms can be found at many "epicenter" landmark software titles throughout history. One of these landmark, mainstream software titles I am both familiar with and inspired by, that being *Super Mario 64*. A 1996 Nintendo video game, *Super Mario 64* acts a cornerstone of modern software discourse, reaching far beyond its initial audience, affecting multiple aspects of contemporary culture, even now. This includes video game culture and beyond. This reach encompasses the original 1996 work, any officially published and unauthorized derivative works, death-of-the-maker concepts, and the cultural echoes of these actions upon the modern art and culture of artists who have interacted with *64*. In the process of seeing consumer-grade interactive media as valid art, one must consider all of the ripples this exemplary 30-year legacy of *Super Mario 64* has put upon the spheres it influences, and beyond. Thousands of elements and topics that relate to, or are direct results of, 1996's initial *64* release have led to discussions, explorations, deconstructions, derivative works, analysis, and direct inspirations. All of these deep-fives are being funneled through the lens of treating interactive software as a burgeoning artform within art history (*He crossed the screen*; Hopkins; *A Casual Revolution; Half-Real*).

Super Mario 64's History and Fantasy Dioramas

Fig. 14, Nintendo, *Super Mario 64 - PAL Region Box Art,* 1996-1997, Digital Render.

Nintendo released the *Super Mario 64* video game software for the similarly-named *Nintendo 64* home video game console machine in American and Japanese territories in 1996, as both a standalone purchasable game and a bundled game with the machine itself (see fig. 14). Before this point in time, the main character of Mario had mostly starred in simulated two-dimensional side-scrolling software, software that lacked implementation of a proper simulated 3-dimensional x-y-z-axis environment or polygonal visuals– instead featuring pixel-based graphics. Although not the first ever "3D platformer" game, nor the first ever time Mario was featured in 3D, *Mario 64* was a major leap in the introduction of 3D platforming and 3D software to feature Mario to a wider common market (platformer is the term for the genre of a "jumping from and navigating platforms with precision"-centric game).

The narrative within *Mario 64* is simple: through an invite to a promised pastry brunch with a companion, Mario arrives at an elaborate castle, and finds no cake brunch and no sign of his royal friend, Princess Peach. Upon entering the mostly-vacant castle, Mario is tasked with jumping into paintings to transport himself to dioramic, dreamlike worlds, akin to *Alice In Wonderland's* alternative *Through the Looking Glass* title. Within these dreamlike pocket worlds, Mario must complete objectives such as solving puzzles, helping residents, or defeating troublemakers– all which result in the collection of a Power Star: an object of narrative importance. Amassing Power Stars allows Mario to access additional places within the castle– hallways and maze-like rooms, which each hold their own magical paintings to new dioramic worlds (see fig. 15). At the conclusion of the game and its narrative story, Mario takes on, and defeats, Bowser– the turtle-dragon villain who kidnapped Princess Peach and stole the Power Stars, thus freeing the princess herself and returning the castle to former glory. The story ends with Mario and Princess Peach enjoying heading inside to share the cake brunch that was promised at the opening of the narrative– bookending the tale.

Fig. 15, Nintendo, *Super Mario 64,* 1996, Video Game Software. Image taken via noclip.website's free-camera tool, created by JasperRLZ

The dioramic worlds within the paintings are fantasy worlds unbound by conventional rules or real-world logic– containing elements like floating platforms, underwater cities, walkable clouds. These painting worlds act as playgrounds for player interaction: sandboxes where the bounds are set, but it's free reign to experiment within the parameters given to the audience– resulting in scenarios or actions that facilitate true audience-art-interaction and explorative play, including things the development team did not intend as possible or achievable, but are supported by the logic and programming of the painting world's freeform design (Burton). Elements within these painting worlds serve both as virtual playground aspects (platforms, objectives, enemies) and artistic visual stylings (sky textures, surface textures, music, lighting, foliage).

A Certain Kind of Audience

During the production of the Nintendo 64 video game console, Nintendo was facing backlash for toning down elements of blood, gore, violence, and sexual themes within games they approved for publishing on their consoles– including games that had these mature or violent themes present within the game feature on a competitor's hardware, but lacked these elements in the Nintendo-only versions. While the choice to censor or

tone down mature themes led to the ire of consumers in the adult and teenage demographics of players, parents and households with younger children were drawn to the kid-friendly nature of Nintendo.

Embracing this trend, Nintendo doubled down on an all-ages approach, which resulted in many conservative or violence-fearing news outlets urging parents to consider Nintendo products over the more "mature" competitors– a thought process that had long-standing ripples in the lives of these Nintendo-raised children as they also became adults. Coupled with a lower price point of entry compared to other machines on the market, the Nintendo demographic shifted to a younger, more family-oriented consumer base– resulting in a majority of Nintendo 64 games being played by children, families, parents, and even youthful adults who all sought to have a more whimsical, all-ages adventure rather than the more mature offerings of the medium at the time. A subsequent result of this demographic shift resulted in *Mario 64* becoming a household title for families who had game systems, as well as being an approachable yet hard-to-master software title that parents themselves fell in love with playing it. Older siblings, parents, or local friends would step in and complete Power Star objectives for a player when they were stumped– Parents and siblings (who may have known *Mario 64* very well) would gather around the television and observe gameplay, celebrating when one of their children or siblings cleared a difficult challenge or found a well-kept secret.

A Single Rock Makes Many Ripples

Fig. 16, Nintendo, *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*; Nintendo, 1998. Video Game
Software. Footage captured by @ZeldaCentral's playthrough via Youtube

Super Mario 64's echoes reach into the game industry, even today. The machines the
graphics and promotional artwork were produced on, *Silicon Graphics* computers, were
proprietors of software such as *Autodesk Maya* and *Lightwave 3D*, softwares that are
still used as industry standards today, were further popularized and made contemporary
icons of 3D by Nintendo's work on titles like *Mario 64*. Nintendo's 1998 title *The Legend
of Zelda: Ocarina of Time,* a video game software still considered one of the most
important, influential, and best games of all time, is built upon *Mario 64*'s codebase and
3D engine, and includes aspects and elements that were cut from *Mario 64,* such as
horseback riding– owing much to *Mario 64*'s paving of the way in both development and
public reception (Iwata Asks *Galaxy, Galaxy 2, Mario*; *Words of Wisdom*) (see fig. 16).
Contemporary competitors, both on the Nintendo 64 and on other platforms, such as
Banjo-Kazooie, Sonic Adventure, or *Spyro the Dragon*, sought to reinterpret and
innovate upon the conventions and ludologic components set in *Mario 64*– so much so
that *Super Mario 64* is considered one of few metrics by which all 3D platformers are
graded against, even to this very day, including future 3D *Super Mario* titles. Veteran *64*
staff such as Shigeru Miyamoto, Takashi Tezuka, and Koji Kondo would go on to work
on other projects, and have trained younger developers to carry the torch in series

including *Pikmin, Zelda* and *Super Mario*, which often contain nods and references to elements of *64* within (Iwata Asks *Galaxy, Galaxy 2, Mario*; Morris).

Fig. 17, Nintendo, Clockwise from top left; *Super Mario 128*, *Pikmin*, *Super Mario Galaxy*, *Super Mario Sunshine,* works range from 1997-2007, Video Game Software. Screenshots provided via archived uploads on YouTube and press articles from, IGN, E3, Kotaku, and thegamer.com.

The success of *Super Mario 64* naturally warranted both internal and audience demand for a direct sequel, and three separate direct sequel projects have been known to exist, albeit only one title ever made it to print. The three projects are known as *Super Mario 64-2, Super Mario 128,* and *Super Mario Sunshine.* Although nothing but a name and vague details was even given for *64-2*, a public demonstration of the *128* project revealed a sprawling tech demo of one hundred and twenty eight individual, identical high-definition Mario 3D models interacting with each other as they mingled about on a spherical surface, changing gravity and interaction parameters. The entire demonstration could also run with automation from a computer rather than a player. While *128* never was intended to be anything but an experiment, elements of *128* got repurposed into other titles: the ant-like crowd control ended up the basis of *Pikmin,* the

high-detail Mario graphics ended up being replicated in *Super Mario Sunshine,* and the spherical, gravity-altering surfaces ended up in a far-future project with a future successor, *Super Mario Galaxy* (see fig. 17)*.* Of the three "direct sequels", *Sunshine* was the only project ever to finish production in the form it was first presented as ("Mario 128"; Porterfield; *Super Mario 64 II*; *Sunshine: Development Staff Interview*).

Contents Unknown until Opened

The term "video game", much akin to "book", describes not the contents, but only the narrative categorical container that the contents live within. In the same way the statement "I read books" tells you nothing of the contents within, the same applies to video games– the nomenclature is a mere envelope category of a media, rather than the media as a whole. Long-gone are the limiters of humble beginnings as time-wasters, novelty programmer projects, and allowance-eating high-score dopamine machines. Video games have arisen to contain the digital age's new tales– natural evolutions from pen-and-paper tabletop adventures of grandiose tales of sword and magic, or the tales of space and science set in times and planets beyond our own. Video games have become a medium that can be anything, including a narrative experience. Video game software doesn't have to strictly a competitive environment or established objective, and the modern scene of video game creation is so expansive that video games can come from anywhere and contain nearly anything. While it is true that *Animal Crossing* and *Candy Crush* are video games, it would be wrong to expect or think all games to be like these– especially when it comes to disliking video games based on a handful of titles. Akin to being in a library the size of a city and only reading two books, one must keep in mind the whole library awaits– you may not have found the right book for you, yet; and no two wings of the library are quite the same!

Video games can be more like a book you can "play", or a film you can "touch – a new category of narrative media within the modern age, rather than just adhering to limited (yet valid as art in their own right), genres of "Arcade Machine" or "Match Three" games. For every sponsored sports game, there's a niche social fishing simulator– for every first-person-shooter, there's a queer indie visual novel. Video games have evolved past the point of wearing early-form labels as limiters of what scope they hold, and society

needs to catch up with seeing them as they truly are: interactive artwork changes with time, unique to the player (or players) as a contextual observer; an audience that is required to make actions– actions that guide the artwork into imprinting a unique, self-influenced experience onto the audience. And is this not identical to what we see happening with "traditionally recognized" forms of art?

Low Art and High Art

A large part of this cultural cycle is the concepts of "low" art and "high art", a concept very intertwined with the discussion of video games (and entertainment as a whole) as both product-oriented commodities and valid artforms (Hebdige). As it's integral to my field of passion, study, and work, I argue that consumable, observable, "low" art media that can feature any combination of visual, audial, interactable, and written elements, so too could video game software could and should be considered as a new classification of software as artworks– under the umbrella of gesamtkunstwerk: this being narrative art, ludological art, or interactive art, stemming from the orchestral terminology of the same name. Much like any form of art, these softwares generate mass-affecting cultural waves of influence, no matter how small or niche– especially in the demographics they are designed to appeal to, and these ripples are seen in the artwork the creators in those resonant demographics produce, as a result. *Super Mario 64* has had a presence in this discussion, as the Smithsonian Museum's *The Art of Video Games* exhibit showcased video games as mediums of art and as artworks– *64* was among them (Epstein).

In the same vein that a virtual sculpture, a 3D model, character design, a film, a painting, a multi-score suite of music, or a written script could be considered art, if not each a standalone artwork, why is the combination of all of them in the medium of a video game not considered equal? Video games have progressed past arcade quarter-eating experiences, but even those should be considered art– just as saying "book" is indicating nothing of its contents: it may be a murder mystery, a collection of poems, Calvin and Hobbs, or ancient philosophy, et cetera. So too, are the containers of "video game software" mere medium descriptors– not indicative of contents, which are of all manner of expression, both "high art" 100-hour-long visual novel games, or "low art"

Pac-Man machines, if a line need be drawn for the sake of detail. In contemporary, hobbyist journalism, this shift to seeing video game software as a container for many things rather than dismissing due to pollution from a handful of genres is beginning to occur, and it is a trend worth paying attention to as the global climate shifts to people being born and grown in environments where this distinction is clear from youth.

Fig. 18, *Left;* VGCartography, *Peach's Castle Map,* 2021, Fanmade Map, Digital Render via DeviantArt with assistance of noclip.website. Right; Nintendo, *Super Mario Sunshine,* 2002, Video Game Software. Image captured via modern re-release, via listing hosted on Nintendo's website.

Furthermore, studies done of *Super Mario 64,* and its 2001 sequel, *Super Mario Sunshine,* highlight their impact on mental spatial acuity and human altruistic behaviors respectively– being emblematic of the navigation and altruistic joys of these virtual spaces, the whimsy and gentleness of the all-ages fantasy-world approach has and continues to have on the landscape of gaming, especially in a time that views only the wartime or violent games as representing the whole medium (something that, refreshingly, is not the reality of the medium) (West; Gentile; Kühn; Library of Medicine) (see fig. 18).

Playground Rumors and "L is Real"

Video games are the springboards of many online ecosystems. Entire communities blossom up around them, featuring ever-growing and ever-active content creators who

find ways to re-imagine, modify, or even reinterpret the original work, including long after it's been published. In my studies of *Super Mario 64's* fandom influence, I found this to be true. These communities, both then and now, have utilized *64's* experience, world, assets, and microculture as their own, with trends and public interest being strong, even today (Retro Gamer). In the late 1990's, infamy was abound in children-generated rumors about the game– these mythos have been retroactively named "playground rumors" by game communities as a whole, and rarely contained actual secrets or truth, but rather fanciful imaginative stories of impossible places or unattainable goals– and such is the case for the specific set of *64* rumors. From Mario obtaining a firearm, to playing as a different character, all the way to reaching a secret room in the castle– things that are not possible within the 1996 game, but filled imaginations and conversations of "what if", alike.

Yet, no rumor is stronger than the variants of the "L is Real" myth. The myth has many variations, but all begin with a a blurry plaque on the castle's fountain could be read, in a pareidolic way, as "L is Real 2401", and should something arbitrary related to this perceived number be performed, suddenly Mario's sibling absent from this title, Luigi, would become playable (Hogeweg). While this rumor is pure fiction, the story gets another chapter in 2020, where *64's* source-code was leaked in a massive data breach, directly with non-public, older code-bases and older versions, seen by no one but Nintendo. By chance, sheer cosmic coincidence, or calculated timing from the leaker, partial data for Luigi was found in this source-code leak. He was uncovered by fans who had been searching for him since they were children– and Luigi was restored using fan-tools and community members, roughly twenty-four years and one month after the initial Japanese release, thus making the fictitious "L is Real 2401" a reality along with the arbitrary number of the prophecy being somehow fulfilled by the adult versions of children who once propagated it (*Gigaleak Validates Super Mario 64 Luigi Myth; L Is*

133t; Mario Mysteries Wiki). (see fig. 19).
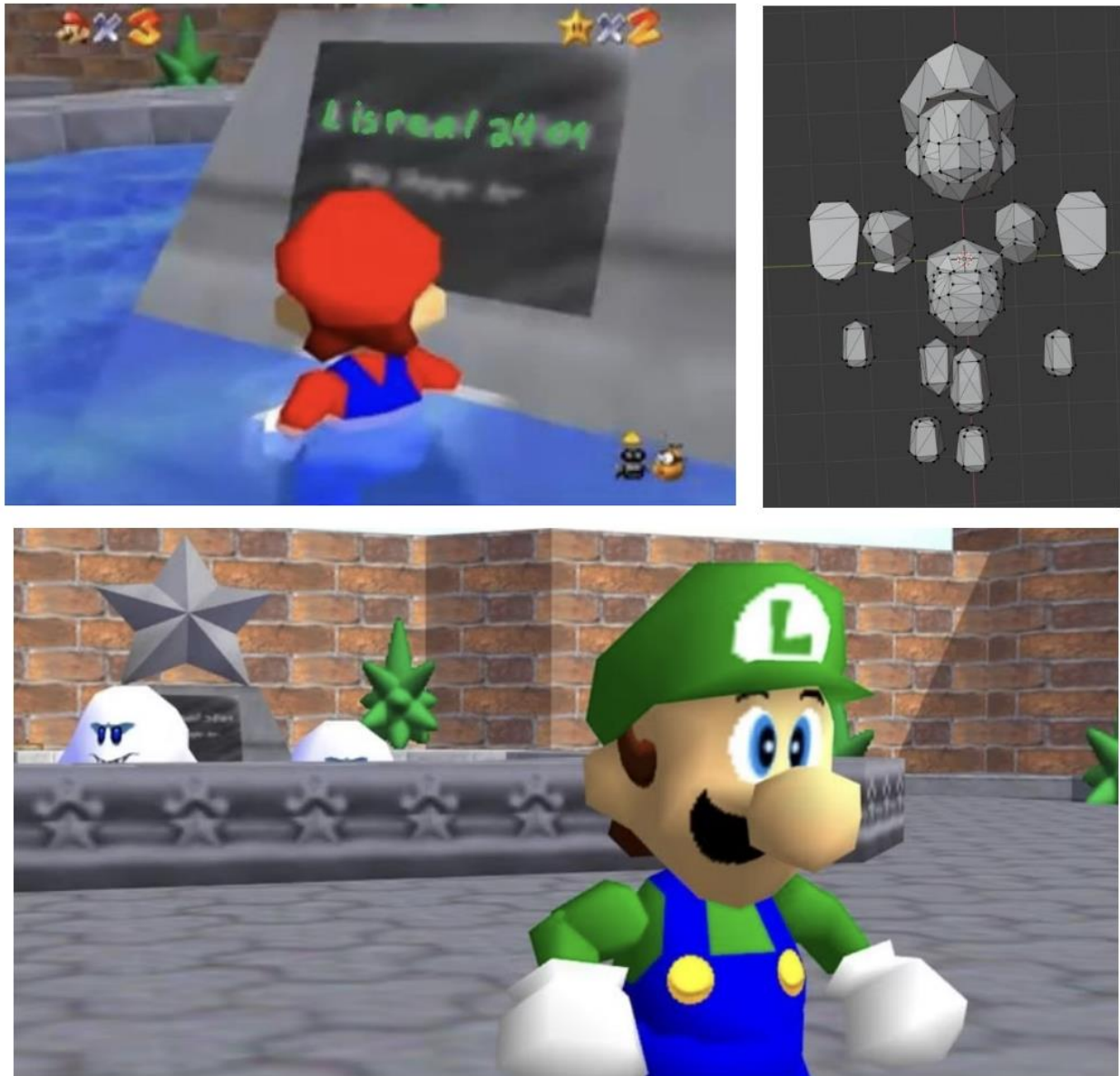
Fig. 19 Top Left; Nintendo, *Super Mario 64,* the 1996 "L is Real" fountain, 1996, video game screenshot drawn over digitally. Top Right; Unknown Twitter User, Luigi's partial data found in the leak, 2020, screenshot of a modeling program. Bottom; a modded version of *Super Mario 64,* with a fan restoration of a playable Luigi utilizing the partial data, 2020. Top images gathered by @SpotartStation on twitter, reported via larepublica.com, bottom image reported via gamerant.com.

Although rumors like "L is Real" are entirely fictitious, it's important to remember no art exists in a vacuum– video games included. *Super Mario 64 and* "L is Real" are intrinsically, culturally linked, regardless of developer intent– and similar cases of cultural context, mythos, or community can be found for nearly every single mainstream, indie, cult-classic, or generally popular video game.

The Kafkaesque Dream & The Crossover Episode

Fig. 20, Nintendo, *Super Mario 64,* June 23 1996, Video Game Software. Image taken via noclip.website's free-camera tool, created by JasperRLZ

Dreams, nightmares, fantasy, and false memories are awry within the communities formed around *64,* and this isn't just limited to "L is Real" concepts. Online accounts and anecdotes note players remembering seeing unusual or unexplainable places, different diorama worlds, different elements of gameplay, all in their childhood copies– yet, when they went back as adults to check on these elements, they were nowhere to be found, yet are still vivid in the recounter's mind as clear as day. *Super Mario 64* has been known to give players *64*-inspired dreams, akin to the effects studied with *Tetris* and other video games, which is the originator of the phenomenon, dubbed "The Tetris Effect" (*Auditory Intrusions; Problematic Interactive Media Use*; *Hypnagogic Images*; Soria). This may be partly due to the abstract and dream-like level design of the areas found farther within the depths of the castle (see fig. 20).

Fig. 21, Unknown Artist, *Wario Apparition*, Fan Render of what a horror-inspired *Super Mario 64* would look like, 2021, via a now-removed video. Image via satirical fandom-run *Super Mario 64 wikia,* m64-conspiracies.fandom.com.

Dreams reported by fans involve stories such as discovering new rooms in the castle that were somehow missed for twenty years, dreams of exploring warped, twisted recreations of diorama worlds of the real game, or being haunted by elements from the game as the dreamer fails to stay alive amidst them. Despite the time gap, *64* players both new and old experiences– so much so that during the 2020's online resurgence of the discussion about childhood (and adulthood) dreams about *64*, the modern gaming audience of children and teens began to twist *64's* legacy into a fictitious, *Blair Witch Project*-type eerie, found-footage-inspired mythos full of (entirely untrue) horror elements inspired by the current gaming trends of "mascot horror" and "liminal spaces" (*Super Mario 64 Has Been Reborn as a Horror Game*; Williams; Spear). This resulted in a long-standing half-joking phrases: "Every Copy of Super Mario 64 is Personalized", and "Mario 64 has a Negative Aura" being created to play into the "creepy factor", while also being joking excuses to explain the mis-remembered places in the false memories of children, the empty castle corridors, any strange places appearing in dreams about the game, and faded or current nightmares involving *64*'s content (The *Super Mario 64* post-mortem horror scene of the 2020's is still thriving as of writing this) (see fig. 21).
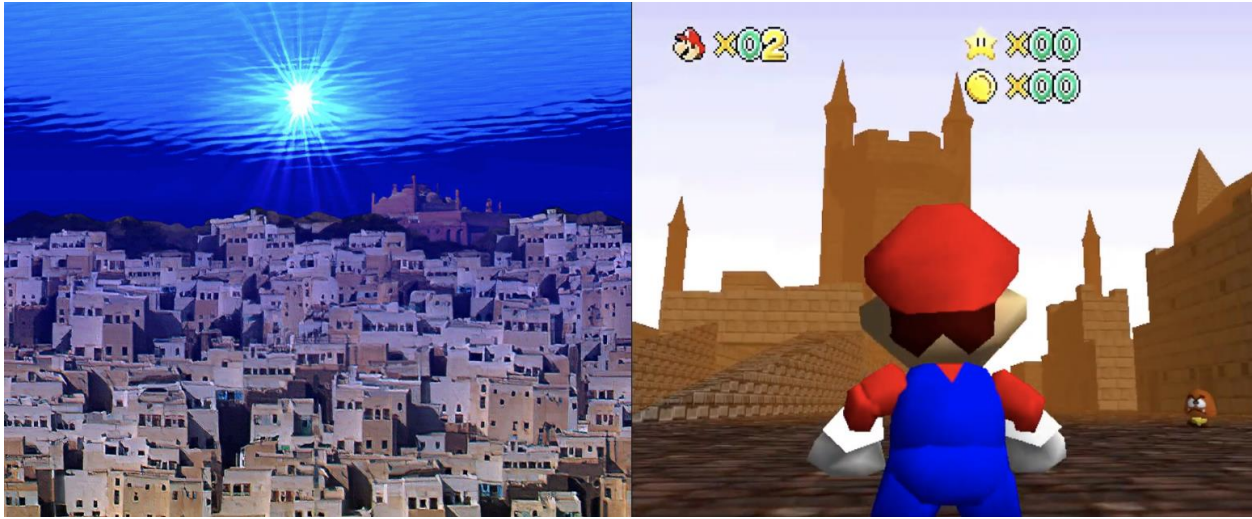
Fig. 22, Left; Nintendo, Backdrop Image from *Super Mario 64*, 1996.
Right: B3313 Team, Fan Re-Imagining of the original backdrop as a playable 3D space, *Dry Town*, from *B3313*, a Fanmade Mod of *Super Mario 64*, 2021-2025. Screenshot of *Dry Town* provided via *B3313 v1.0.2: Dry Town - All Stars* by Stevoisiak on YouTube.

This all culminated when a team of community members released a *64* mod, *B3313,* which is designed to encapsulate all of the above through modifying an existing *64* rom. Horror elements, non-euclidean geometry, hidden levels, alternate dioramas, random events, a more labyrinthian castle layout, recreations of pre-release elements, angelic and nightmarish imagery, recreations of multiple anecdotes of dreams, and (of course) Luigi, are all present in this community-made project, all unofficial, yet beloved– bringing to life aspects that only were in the minds of fans, to life once more– by modifying original artwork to become a derivative, but equally valid, experience (see fig. 22).

Fig. 23, Left; Tatsuro Yamashita, *FOR YOU*, Jan 1982, Vinyl LP Album.
Right; JQHN, *Tatsuro Yamashita - For You But With Super Mario 64 Soundfont,* May 2023, Fanmade Parody LP Album Cover by JQHN via YouTube.

Fandom-made mathematical and computer-code breakdowns and technical studies have been created detailing physics, mechanics, and virtual behaviors of the game world itself on a scientific level (Alexandra; Pannenkoek2012). Early fan recreations included alternate-colored Mario models, music videos, and recolored game elements– soon followed by custom levels (*A Giant Super Mario 64 Hack*). As the internet has an unwritten belief that "it's free, it's on the internet", fans were heavily involved in modding and mixing pop culture icons and elements into *64*, and as time went on, these became more elaborate: current-day remixed works include the entire Japanese pop album by Tatsuro Yamashita, *For You,* being recreated using sounds from *Super Mario 64*'s audio cue library (see fig. 23).

Fig. 24, Radicube, *Untitled,* Fanmade Art, *Undertale x Super Mario 64* (L is Real), taken from an audio crossover remix uploaded by @Sunny064 via YouTube, 2024. Album cover, video, and audio.

Users from multiple non-connected fandoms also ended up mixing together by excited (and legally irreverent) fans– such as a music track from the indie game *Undertale* being remixed in the *64* soundfont to commemorate "L is Real", presumably enjoyed by *Undertale* fans who may not have even been alive when *64*'s "L is Real" rumor was in its heyday (see fig. 24).

Hybridized Third Places, The Internet Age, & Communities of Subculture

The Third Place, Offline and Online

There's a concept in sociology known as the "third place". Contextually, third places are flanked by first places– homes, and second places– places of work or business. This leaves the gap where third places fill in: the remaining spaces of social and communal interaction. Bars, hair salons, parks, arcades, town squares, backyards, stores, restaurants– these and more all qualify as third spaces. Third spaces historically were

places where culture flourished– places where people met, strangers made friends, and steam was let off, all with a sense of belonging and community.

Yet, we see less and less engagement in these spaces in our current time. Some argue third places are "dying", being replaced by monetary experiences and shrinking communal spaces. Others argue third spaces have diminished in an online social-media driven age, or are being forgotten in favor of home relaxation, social reclusivity, fear of strangers, and work-heavy culture. I feel although third places are diminishing in the real world for these reasons, I also see third places popping up in an unusual place: online. Servers, communities, chatrooms, Virtual Reality worlds all act as third places for those who explore them. These metaphysical places are then at times hybridized into the real world, be it through meetups, conventions, or festivals. While these online communities or in-person events may seem unusual to the uninitiated, they provide valuable third spaces for folks to come together, build community, and celebrate their shared identity and interests, both in the physical world and in the virtual world.

These places provide valuable space for folks to come together, build communities, and celebrate their shared identity and interests, both in the physical world and in the virtual world. I note, in a prior study, how VR communities like VRChat have revolutionized digital third spaces, including by using assets from other forms of media outside of their original contexts, such as *Super Mario 64* assets. This is partly due to the rise of the personal computer in the 2000's, which allowed *Mario 64*'s fandom and community to flourish in online spaces, something not unusual for media in the internet age ("25 Years Ago"; Spear; *One of Us*).

Fig. 25, Nck, *Super Mario 64 VRChat World!,* 2023*, screen recording,* video via @NcKlol on YouTube, video and audio.

In the quarter of a century since, *64*'s community has blossomed into players taking alternate ways of engaging with the software, such as racing other players to complete the game quickly, modifying the game to include custom levels, modifying the game to play online with friends, or extracting 3D models from the game to utilize in spaces and places they were not designed to normally exist in, such as VR– something art historians are and have been aware of (Adams; Plunkett; Foster; Lopez; "120 Star") (see fig. 25).

Animal Crossing, Webfishing, VRChat, and Surrogate Third Spaces

Fig. 26, Dave Saunders, *Lockdown-Era Animal Crossing - Collage of Moments*, 2020 - 2021, Images Captured via Software; Nintendo, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons,* March 2020. Nintendo Switch, Video Game Software.

During the pandemic, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons,* was released. Within this game the player is tasked with taking care of an island with non-player-character anthro animal furry-like inhabitants. The player can customize everything; from clothing, to furniture, to their avatar. However, since other real-life players could visit each other's islands en masse, *Animal Crossing* quickly became a surrogate third space in lieu of lockdown– people were having weddings, hosting parties, holding online meetups, and having fun interacting through the game, all through *Animal Crossing.* Amidst my own friend groups and online acquaintances, we would meet up in the game and joke about how none of us were practicing social distancing, coping with the situation through our own virtual third space and lighthearted humor (see fig. 26). The peak hype of *Animal Crossing* may be long behind us, but it's important to remember and recognize what an important role this played in video game culture and society for those who partook in it.
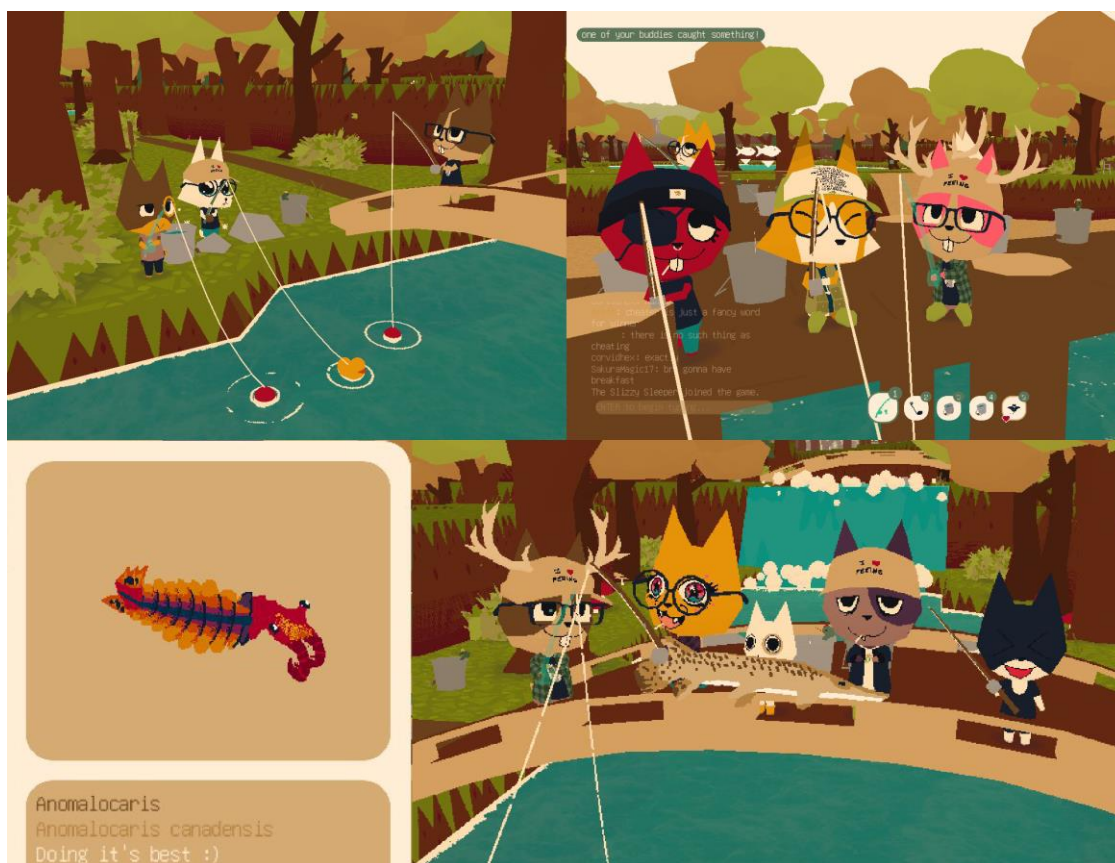
Fig. 27, Dave Saunders, *WEBFISHING: Old Friends and New Faces - Collage of Moments*, 2024, Images Captured via Software; lamedeveloper, *WEBFISHING,* Nov. 2024. Indie PC Game, Video Game Software.

Although no world events preceded the release, *WEBFISHING* garnered similar third-space attention for its *Animal Crossing*-like chill atmosphere, nonviolent nature, and communal gameplay. The player sets their avatar as either a cat or dog, and is able to fish– alone or with others, be it friends or random players in online lobbies. Many players customized their avatars on their sonas, and much of the playerbase were furries. Despite this, folks of all types partook and socialized in webfishing, either to catch the biggest fish or just to pass the time at the end of a long day– effectively creating a shared, yet modular, third space (see fig. 27).

Some online third spaces extend past the screen. Within virtual reality (VR), players can set their avatars– the thing they "puppet" and interact with the virtual world with– as

nearly anything. Avatars can be linked to headsets and trackers, allowing things like blinking, mouth movement, hand and leg movement, and expressions. Players will create or commission VR Avatar models of just about anything you can think of. Obscure, absurd, obscene, silly– it's all here. You'll find sonas, original characters, Mickey Mouse, *Super Mario*, and *Pokémon* here too. Almost as an extension to sonas, cosplay, and fursuiting, many players will find or set favorite avatar models as their defaults– and that ends up being what others will see them as and interact with (see fig. 28).

Fig. 28, photo by u/asssmonkeee, *The Ancients of VRChat*, 2021, Photograph in VR posted via Reddit, Digital Image.

In an age struggling with over-urbanization, climate change, and ever-growing rates of depression and loneliness, we need to re-embrace third places now more than ever; both online and offline. VR third spaces may be a key step in the future of our world, and it's anyone's guess how the medium will transform with technological advancements in the next twenty years.

"F— it, we Ball"

The topics I cover, as well as the type of people I am a part of, are currently under more scrutiny, judgment, and suppression by our nation, legislation, society, and world– more than ever before within my lifetime. These are my friends, family, and colleagues– my own non-binary self, my trans siblings, my queer community. These are my cohorts in subculture– in celebration of self, of pride, of interest, and of fandom. We must clear up the misunderstandings– through education and examples of what we are, what we are not, and how we're people, too. We must start small and big alike– and part of this can begin with art.

Despite everything, we persist. Queer people, marginalized groups, neurodivergent folk– we are not going away. We may be in trying times now more than ever, but with the fuel of spite and self-affirming existence, we will prevail. I am reminded of a phrase from rap culture and basketball culture: "fuck it, we ball".
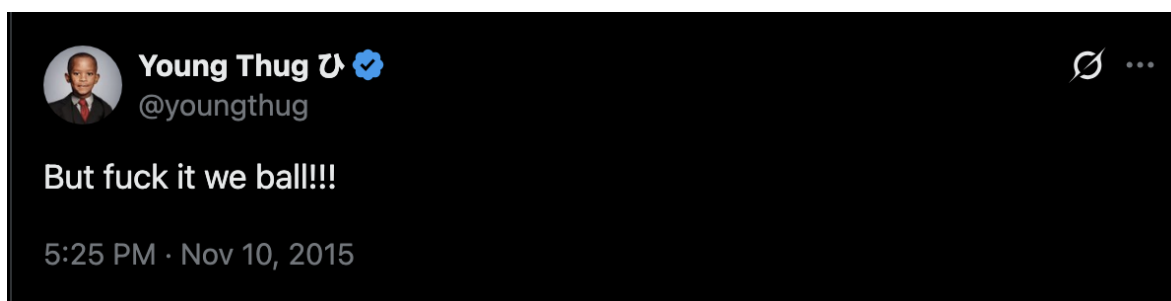
Fig. 29, Young Thug, *But fuck it we Ball!!! (Unofficial Title)*, Twitter Post, 2015, Digital Screenshot of Social Media.

A viral tweet by Young Thug in 2015 popularized the phrase on the internet as a whole, and is where I first heard it. (see fig. 29). Although this saying pops up in memes and jokes, it resonates with me in a unique way. It can mean different things in different contexts, but for the most part it reads as "We're at an disadvantage, but we're giving it our all anyway", "Things are fucked but let's do it anyway", or "Screw it, I'm down." If

"ball" (basketball) is "life"(life of as in a shared existence of professional commitment, discipline, and sports culture), as the phrase "Ball is life" goes, can this not also be read as "Fuck it, we *live*"? So, fuck it. We live. We'll make art, we'll be us, and we'll survive.

Like Stars in a Tide Pool

Allegory of the Tide Pool and the Ocean

Fig. 30, Dave Saunders*, Like Stars in a Tide Pool - Logo,* 2024 - 2025, Digital Drawing.

The name of my gallery, project, and overall thesis is inherently a metaphor mirroring the direct nature of culture, subculture, and memetic mutation– all concepts also found within the publication *The Shape of Time* (Kubler 56, 112). Tide pools are individual, semi-isolated aquatic ecosystems resting against a swelling, ever-changing masses of life, water, and change: an entire ocean. This ocean connects to oceans across the world, all to be performers in a planet-wide ballet of fish, microscopic lifeforms, plankton, minerals, bacteria, sea creatures, algae– the participant list goes on. But what of the tide pools? As the ocean water raises and lowers with the phases of the moon, the tides of the hour, and the crests of waves, the tide pools exchange and refresh their contents in this oceanic dance. The pools lower to the ocean do so semi-daily, while the pools highest on the sandy, land-locked rocks only do maybe once a month or less, with the help of severe weather– every pool stepped in between takes a position somewhere along the graph of the two extremes. Be it monthly or daily, the exchange in this dance cycles new, more globally-standardized oceanic life into the tide pools, and the ocean gains tide-pool-mutated life– be it big changes or small, the exchange swaps parts of unending adaptation, bringing all sorts of new species and conditions into the mix, from

each any every level. Maybe the driest pools facilitated a starfish resistant to sunlight? Or the bacteria of the lowest pools will one day learn how to live amphibiously? Or, maybe, just maybe, the fish who ended up being stranded in the deepest part of a middle-level tide pool will hide away with a companion, start a colony of fish, and over the course of many years, become a whole new variant of that fish collectively. Yet, at night, when the stars shine bright and the sky is clear– the lapping ocean, the many dotted tide pools, and the dancing global sea all reflect the stars in their waters.

This is all applicable to global culture, fandoms, subcultures, micro-communities, and every space in between: which function much like the tide pools, the ocean, and the global sea. Mutations occur within culture, and develop onward and onward– originating in the object of culture itself, through creation, culture, replication, and mutation and: until we end up with something entirely new. Eventually, be it soon or later, this will reach the larger culture, traveling up the chain or around from space to space– until it reaches the global stage, only to repeat the cycle again at the point at which it returns to the subculture, ready to be transformed anew. In this way, each work of art, concept, or idea breathes and lives its own life. Still, at the end of all of this, we are all part of the human experience, are we not? That is our galaxy to reflect back into the void: we are all in this together, coexisting in this dance, in our own world, in our own oceans, in our own tide pools– and we reflect the stars in their waters, one and the same. This whole allegory is reflected in the logo of the exhibition (see fig. 30).

I truly believe that any created artwork, no matter for what purpose or societal category it falls within, has the power to resonate. As to whom it resonates with– be it the creator, the world, or an audience of one, I believe someone somewhere will truly "get it", even if no one else does. It may move them to tears, motivate them to achieve their dreams, or aid them in moving through difficult times. We have no way to predict how culture, context, and personality can influence an artwork's resonance– we have only to accept that it occurs, andt can occur from anyone anywhere, toward anything. And much like the starry array shining down on the tide pools, the sea, and the steppe of rock– so too, does art reflect back at us.

Visual Style

Fig. 31, Dave Saunders*, Like Stars in a Tide Pool,* 2023 - 2025, Video Game Screenshot.

For my thesis game, I chose to go with a low-poly look– that is, making the area geometry and character geometry out of as few 3D shapes as possible (low-poly means having a low polygon count) (see fig. 31). Although it's an "outdated" look seen mostly in early 3D software and video games, I felt it has an endearing "softness" and charm that's hard to replicate with high-fidelity 3D artwork. Low-poly artwork has had a resurgence in the 2010's and onward, as artists and indie game developers choose to utilize the style as both an homage to 90's titles like *Super Mario 64*, but also out of nostalgic obligation– some of us just enjoy the way it looks!

Many of the textures within the 3D environments and character models were stylistically drawn close to chalk, something I've done in homage to *Squeaky Chalk*, a book written and illustrated by a local author I met long ago– pictures and stories of what it was like growing up in the City of Paterson, which I enjoyed pouring over in my youth.

Uniform Philosophy and Methodology

Since the tools to make art, video games, characters, and indie work has been made readily available in the internet age, my goal was clear: to create a computer video game that houses retro-looking fantasy worlds, navigated through whimsical and non-realistic methods, populated by characters that represent both my areas of study within the thesis. Serving as a narrative container, but also being directly inspired by folks I know, with reference to events I've lived alongside them through– all under the topic-umbrellas of sonas, subculture, self expression, and personal identity celebration. Video games as a medium aligned with my passion, my fandoms, my subcultures, and my love of narrative media. Indie games are often counter-culture to the media format games usually fall into. Triple-A big-budget games played by males in the ten-to-thirty year-old demographic range typically include concepts of "lives", "kills", "respawning", competition, violence, weaponry, or score-oriented gameplay– something I chose to not portray any of. I was also drawn to games as a way to provide non-conventional narrative experiences: ways to "put you in the shoes" of an individual. Due to the difficult, sensitive, and politically charged nature of my thesis topics, this would allow self-guided ease-in ways to engage with the topic, rather than it being blasted forward without being able to control the pace of information. Indie games such as *Celeste* or *Undertale* portray the same themes as I, and are successful in using the medium to their strengths. I argue indie games, or just video games in general, are excellent ways to learn of such topics and normalize them.

Basing research once more to *Super Mario 64* in particular, as the generation who played *64* as children grew older, many now-teenagers took to creating fan-content, while then-current adults in the games industry who engaged with the title saw a similar inspiring magic to motivate their own endeavors. Valve software co-founder, Gabe Newell, stated *Super Mario 64* was his favorite video game, and convinced him video games could be considered art (McFerran; Sickr). Valve is responsible for creating or being a part of many PC game hits, including *Half-Life 2, Portal, Team Fortress 2,* and compilations and tools such as *The Orange Box, Garry's Mod,* and *Source Filmmaker.* Valve's video game distribution and publishing platform, Steam, is one of the largest distributors of video game software– including non-big-budget titles by independent

developers (known as indie games). Steam reviews of indie video game titles like or inspired by *64* help reupholster that the "magic", game design, direction of elements, and essence of whimsy present in *64* shines true, even with game audiences and indie developers today, as games such as *Undertale, Pseudoregalia, A Hat in Time,* and *Celeste* show– including in the anniversary microgame *Celeste 64*, which pays homage to *Super Mario 64* more directly. Partly in response to the corporate nature of Steam, the self-publishing platform Itch.io has arisen, allowing smaller projects to shine– including games that have been produced by marginalized groups, contain positive themes, or have pacifist or non-combat gameplay, diversifying the landscape of who gets to make games, and which games are seen by audiences.

Furthermore, some titles seek to encapsulate or embody the style *Super Mario 64* shows visually and ludologically, such as *Pseudoregalia*. Set within a dreamscape castle, *Pseudoregalia* tasks players with acrobatically navigating labyrinthian, surreal environments ripe with low-detail, blocky imagery harking back to late 80's and early 90's 3D rendered graphics (this art style is referred to as low-polygon-graphics, or simply lowpoly), something *64* is considered a champion of perfecting as an artform. All of these historical ripples apply to nearly every mainstream video game ever created, and they all intermingle and integrate into the visual research and stylistic taste within the works I create, as well as *Like Stars in a Tlde Pool.*

Character Designs and Personal Histories

Fig. 32, Dave Saunders, *Like Stars in a Tide Pool - 2D Character Model Sheets Collection,* 2021 - 2025, Digital Drawings.

Designing characters brings me joy, be it an original species of creatures, anthro furries, robots, or humans. Imbuing my creations with backstory, personality, and a "life of their own" always has been, and still is, an ever-present staple of my artistic interests, even in my youth. I strive to weave that "magic essence" into everything I create, and no creation of mine receives it more than character designs— no matter what form or species the character becomes. For this project, I created twelve original characters, each representing different archetypes; types of people whose passions and identities you'd find within fandoms and subcultures (see fig. 32). Communities both online and offline feature "traditionally effeminate" or non-hypermasculine men, non-feminine women, non-cis folks, trans individuals, people of all races, of all backgrounds, of all beliefs— the list goes on. Majority-wise a lot of these communities allow all individuals inclusion and allow them to exist comfortably in their spaces, as well as pursue their interests wholeheartedly. There are always issues, but changes are being made every day in each space— some spaces more progressive or equitable than others— yet all growing, and at times, more grown than the "outside world". I always feel it is important to keep all types of people in mind when designing my characters.

When designing characters, I take cues from films, cartoons, books, or games– media I enjoy. Character expressions and stylizations take notes from animated features such as *Fantastic Mr. Fox, Lilo & Stitch, Zootopia, Turning Red, How to Train Your Dragon, Raya and the Last Dragon, Soul, and Wall-E.* Each of these films offers different solutions to design, animate, and imbue lifelike charm into fictional characters– no matter if the character is human, non-human, robotic, or furry. Character relationships were inspired by stories like the furry-coded *Arashi No Yoru Ni,* an anime film starring a goat and a wolf who seek to be friends despite their predator and prey dynamic– including the interpretable-as-gay subtext that follows. Books such as *The Fire Within* and *The Bear Comes Home* feature furry-esque characters who interact, live, and exist with the world, acting with the same agency as people– these kinds of stories being instrumental in helping me shape my own worlds where humans and non-humans may coexist. Character stories were inspired by the lore-heavy *Dragonology Handbook, Lord of The Rings*, *Zelda* series, and *Zelda* behind-the-scenes production books of *Hyrule Historia* and *Creating a Champion*. All these sources chronicle how lore and story can inform (and enhance) a character design, and how the inverse can be worked into a design to make it more cohesive to an audience. This can be shown both in-universe through narrative or supplemental information (diegetic history, text, journals, or records written by characters of the media, in-universe), or through a "look behind the curtain" method in our real-world– such as notes from the creator, development interviews, staff notes, documentaries, or "the making of" artbooks.

Character #01 - Skunkbunny.

Fig. 33, Dave Saunders*, Character #01 - Skunkbunny,* 2022 - 2025, Digital Drawing.

Of all twelve characters, the Skunkbunny *(see fig. 33)* is the most akin to myself, and is a character I consider one of my own sonas. During my time in Albany pursuing my undergrad, another graphic design student tasked with designing me a logo once compared me to a generous squirrel, who in their words "would always be willing to help, even if it was their very last nut"– a playful innuendo, yet genuine remark that ended up solidifying the squirrel as my logo *(see fig. 34).*
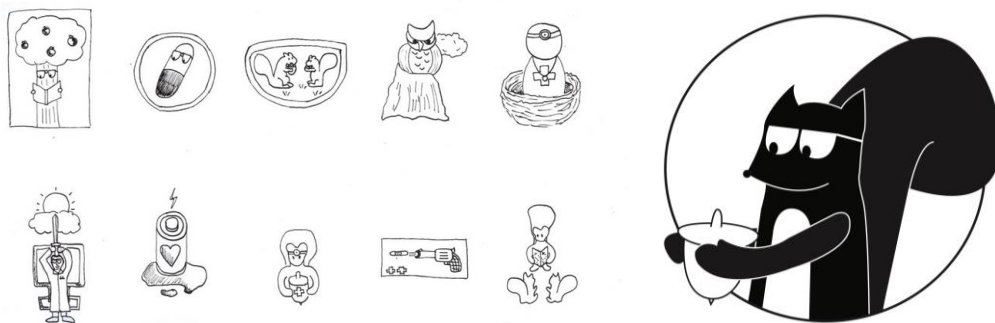

Fig. 34, Wayne Duffy*, Brand Thy Neighbor: Dave - Sketches & Final,* 2015; Pen & Ink.

As I was planning the design of the Skunkbunny, a video essay on *Super Mario Galaxy* caught my eye– an essay which explores contrast of the loneliness and solitude starkly in opposition of whimsy and wonder, a game that starts a chapter with being awoken by a star-eared bunny on a tiny planet in the emptiness of vast outer space *(see fig. 35).*

Fig. 35, Nintendo, *Super Mario Galaxy,* 1 Nov. 2007, Video Game Software. Longplay Footage captures of @ninbanyan's playthrough via YouTube

Skunks are my favorite animal, and I've enjoyed creating skunk characters before. As a form of homage to my youth and fondness of memories, as well as my own memories of *Super Mario Galaxy,* I chose to combine the elements of a skunk, *Super Mario Galaxy* bunny, and *Dave Squirrel* logo into a proper hybrid. The choice of a hybrid, fantasy-infused species is not uncommon in furry culture, and on online platforms like ToyHouse or DeviantArt one will often find "fusion" or "hybrid" characters or species for sale for adoption, or as creator's characters within every media subculture.

In a nostalgic nod to the space-rabbit trope present within the 3D *Super Mario* series, I assigned celestial accents as a major part of her design, majorly through her star-tipped ears and sun-patterned clothing. Her colors evoke palettes of the 2010's retro-art

resurgence movements "Frutiger Aero" and "Vaporwave", which are exemplified within the 2016 game software *Broken Reali*ty (see fig. 38). Patterns of her shirt and kimono jacket were thematically chosen as callbacks to the *Jazz Cup* and the grass within *Pokémon Sapphire*'s opening titles, both tied to feelings of nostalgia in my own life and youth (see fig. 36, fig. 37).

Fig. 36, Sweetheart Cup Company, Solo Cup Company, Disposable Dishware design, *Jazz*, 1992. Textural Image

Fig. 37, Nintendo, The Pokémon Company, Game Freak LTD, Opening Title for *Pokémon Sapphire*, *Pokémon Sapphire*, 21 Nov. 2002. Video Game Software.

Fig. 38, Dynamic Media Triad, Digital Tribe, *Broken Reality*, 29 Nov. 2018. Video Game Software.

Thematically, I assigned her a story similar to my own for her backstory, identity, and gender awakening. When I was a teenager, I found out that Maddie Blaustein, a voice actor for the *Pokémon* anime's dubbing crew, was a trans individual– and she was happy, successful, and most strangely to me, a *Pokémon* fan and fandom contributor despite her status as a professional part of the *Pokémon* production space. A strange, undefinable spark of realization welled up inside me. Although it would take nearly ten more years for me to identify who exactly I truly was, and what this feeling meant, I can say without a doubt that I always knew I was different. Although I had always known I was different in a romantic way, in that crucial, unforgettable moment I knew a new level of that difference: that I could even be outside of the gender binary at all.

The Skunkbunny's story mirrors this awakening in my own personal history as a form of celebration. Her backstory and occupation I've written for her also calls back to celebrating involvement in subculture in a metanarrative way, as the Skunkbunny continues her passion by creating multi-faceted characters and heartfelt stories that showcase different types of people or identities in a celebratory way.

Character #02 - Bat. Character #06 - Gargoyle.

Calling
Baker, Clothing Maker

Pronouns
He/Him & They/Them

Favorite Things
Decorating Cakes
Caring for Houseplants
Fried Empanadas
Collecting Retro Games

Fig. 39, Dave Saunders, *Character #02 - Bat,* 2022 - 2025, Digital Drawing.

Calling
Club DJ, Musician

Pronouns
She/Her

Favorite Things
Hi-Fi Stereo Systems
Cozy Cafes
Jam Beignets
Strategy Card Games

Fig. 40, Dave Saunders, *Character #06 - Gargoyle,* 2022 - 2025, Digital Drawing.
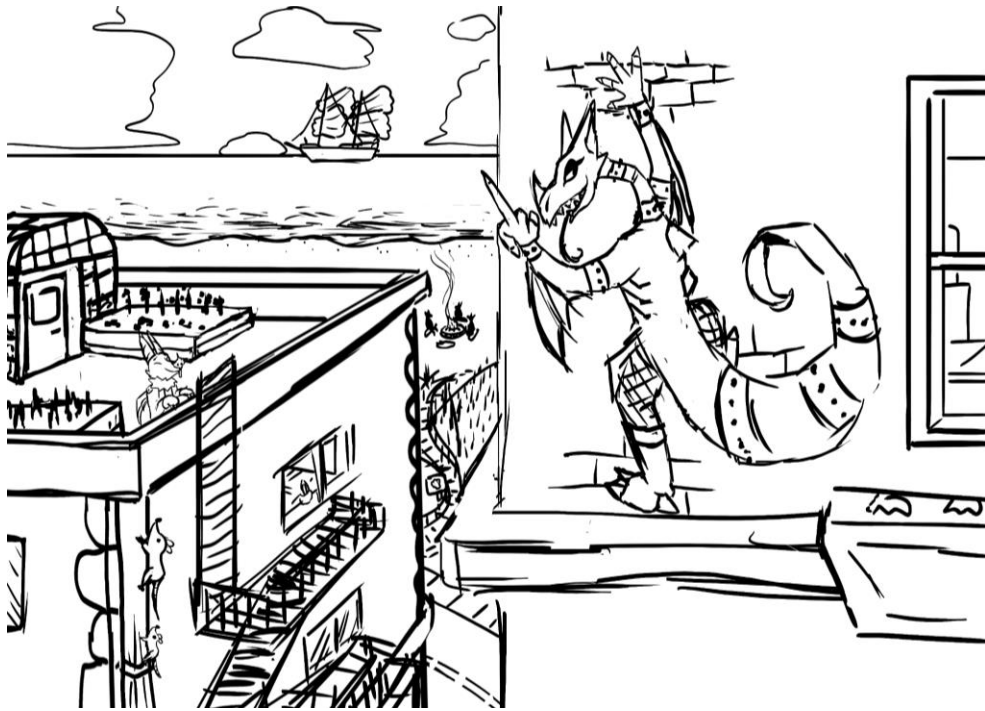
Fig. 41, Dave Saunders, *Urban: Gargoyle & Bat*, 2022, Digital Artwork.

The origin of the Bat and the Gargoyle (see fig. 39, fig. 40) are interesting in hindsight, as I created them for a personal drawing challenge spun off of a class assignment, and the duo began life as mere background "filler" characters (see fig. 41). For the Bat, I chose a cheeky pun on "fruit bat", ending up with citrus and orchid motifs on his body in addition to the vampire-themed clothing. For the Gargoyle, I built her as a chameleon-esque punk-goth draconic character, with hints of retro music culture in her clothing and accessories. Both characters originally were separate– I hadn't considered they'd be friends, or even knew of each other at the time of drawing them.

In early 2023, I traveled to Virginia to attend a *Rice Garden* meetup (one of my online-offline-hybrid friend groups) where I rekindled my friendship with one of the attendees, Giz. Having transitioned in the years since our last meetup, he had completely come into his own as his truest self– and shared his passions of vampire media and fandom culture with the group, as well as his own bat sona. Amused at the similarities, I wrote my Bat character to mirror and pay homage to Giz– a person who matched up pretty perfectly with my creation– a character was created before I reconnected with Giz!

Then, in early 2024, at the next *Rice Garden* meetup, Giz and I grew closer to Jamie, a newcomer to the meetups who loved music and music history. Jamie also had her own story of coming into her own, and we as a group made her– and the group made us– feel as if we belonged there. I joked that since Jamie is a tall music lover and Giz is short vampire enthusiast, Jamie must be the fabled gargoyle analog– she tells me she's not really a fan of dragons, and she doesn't really wear goth fashion. Fast forward to the summer, and Jamie shows the group a picture of her wearing goth attire, dressed nearly one-to-one with the Gargoyle. I joked that the "Gargoyle prophecy" had finally come true– the same realization she had arrived at the moment she took the picture! And just like that– we noted that I "knew" Giz and Jamie before I even met them– or, cosmically, the meeting was fate all along.

Inspired by the duo of buddies, the Bat has reshaped into a baker who bakes enchanted goods, and loves to tailor clothes– and the Gargoyle has reshaped into a punky, beats-loving DJ who makes mixtapes and loves goth fashion. Both characters, much like their real-life mirrors, have personal stories inspired by the lives of transgender individuals– in struggle, rebirth, and metamorphosis into one's true self. This duo of characters have been featured in my work before in other contexts, but now hold an extra special place in my heart because of the people they've come to mirror and remind me of: my friends– or to say more accurately, my found family.

Character #03 - Sheep.

Fig. 42, Dave Saunders*, Character #03 - Sheep,* 2025, Digital Drawing.

A conglomerate of the sweet and helpful nerds I've known, the Sheep (see fig. 42) is meant to represent folks who excel in kind, enthusiastic research into older technologies or specialized media. A big part of fandoms across the board is preservation of older media– be it hardware, software, footage, audio, writing, or merchandise. The choice of sheep was chosen to represent an inviting, warm disposition. The clothing he wears is not unlike that of convention goers– comfortable and self-secure– representative of men who wear skirts or kilts despite any (outdated and unfounded) societal judgements. He carries a shoulder bag with various analog tech within it, ready to connect and assist those who share his interests or need his assistance, bearing a smile without difficulty.

I got to experience such a connection myself, during the *Rice Garden* meetup in 2024. This even solidified the importance of older hardware preservation to me, by fulfilling a lifelong dream of mine: linking up my childhood copy of *Pokémon Sapphire* with a group of friends for a four-player, twenty-four creature big GameCube-hosted *Pokémon Colosseum* battle. To link up a GameBoy Advance to a GameCube was something

considered so novel in 2003, yet was complex to set up– let alone four of them at once. This twenty-four creature four-player battle is so absurd that it's never been done in any future *Pokémon* hardware or software beyond the GameCube.

Despite the intimidation, I coordinated with another long-time *Rice Garden* friend, Tommy, to ensure we had everything planned in advance. This was something I was unable to do as a child, as I lacked the hardware, friend group, and locale to make it happen. *Colosseum's* story and world are different, as it's set in a gritty, rustbelt-style environment inspired by Arizona, rather than the traditional Japanese inspirations of the other games. There, Tommy, Jamie, Giz, members of the Rice Garden, and I came together to make it work, and we bore witness to success. Through the mess of cables, hands, screens, and menus, we had assembled the right people in the same place with enough out-of-production hardware, software, and time to make it happen– a moment for me that was twenty years in the making (see fig. 43).

Fig. 43, Vlad Wilkinson, Daryl Reader, Tommy Miles, Gizmo Thorne, Jamie Langan, Dave Saunders, *Rice Garden Pokémon Colosseum Link-Up*, 2024, Collaborative Photograph Collage. Software: Nintendo, The Pokémon Company, Game Freak LTD*, Pokemon Sapphire, Ruby, Emerald, FireRed, & LeafGreen Versions,* 2002-2005. Nintendo Game Boy Advance, Video Game Software. *Pokémon Colosseum, Pokémon XD: Gale of Darkness* 2003-2005. Nintendo Gamecube, Video Game Software.

The battle ended up being a mess of poor planning, unbalanced Pokémon teams, and no strategy. Yet, that didn't matter– as a group, we had done it! We had experienced a long-forgotten, overlooked, no-longer-relevant piece of interactive art and we did it together. A bit later, I stumbled upon a *Pokémon Colosseum* retrospective video– lo and behold, the twenty-four battle was mentioned as something nearly no one had been able to experience– and the four of us happily commented with this very same story. The Sheep represents the ethos of this entire experience, and the kindness and passion of those who made it happen– especially those folk who may be judged for not living up to a gender or interest "expectation".

Character #04 - Fox. Character #05 - Chicken.

Calling
Event Staffer, Tour Guide

Pronouns
She/Her

Favorite Things
Cosplay Prop Crafting
Cruise-Ship Vacations
Mochi Ice Cream
Photographing Wildlife

Fig. 44, Dave Saunders*, Character #04 - Fox,* 2025, Digital Drawing.

Fig. 45, Dave Saunders, *Character #05 - Chicken,* 2025, Digital Drawing.

The Fox and the Chicken (see fig. 44, fig. 45) have a unique kind of character dynamic: they're romantic partners. It's common in fandom spaces for people to meet their significant others, meet in-person only at conventions, or for partners to share overlap in the fandoms they enjoy, both online and offline. Their species were also chosen as stereotypical "opposites", as the chicken and fox play the roles of food and hunter respectively in nature. I chose this dichotomy to represent the idea of any kind of relationship being able to bridge gaps and unite inherent differences– including culture, personality, or demeanour. During their time off, they both join together in seeking out new activities and restaurants to try out, together.

The Fox's attire calls to different Japanese cultural symbols. The wish tags on the ears come from Tanabata, a star festival. Her attire takes design cues from cherry blossom petals and colors, the tree of which is a large part of Japanese culture, history, and design motifs. Her occupation is that of a friendly tour guide– someone deeply engrossed in a culture enough to help spread knowledge about it. Japanese culture and cultural exchange as a whole plays a strong place in fandom history– artists and fans from all over the world like all sorts of different things from all sorts of places, especially

now that our world is connected via the internet. I've learned so much about other places and cultures through meeting people who are from places other than my own, and I relish the experience of growing my world through meeting them.

The Chicken's attire and style harken to clothing and patterns one might find in farming and rural towns and cities– plaid fabrics, fuzz-lined jackets, and elegant autumn colors. This is contrasted with the athletic sweatpants and geometric-pattern vest, all representing the influx and meshing of traditional wear with modern clothing and styles– and the subsequent subculture-infused aspects that occur on a metaphysical level, too. Their character is one of introspection, – every afternoon, they journal and write poems, sitting under their favorite oak tree. Since the Chicken is a non-binary, genderfluid individual, I felt I needed a way to communicate the idea of a shifting identity. Thus, their gender changes with the seasons– they shift and adapt alongside nature. They embrace what's inside them with open arms– be it writing or identity. The inclusion of their prosthetic leg and talon was motivated by a statement from a translated Japanese interview with *Earthbound / Mother* series creator and director Shigisato Itoi. Within this interview, Itoi is asked why one of the main characters within *Mother 3* has a handicap (a bad, crooked leg). This question also echoes previous wonderings about gay-coded and trans-coded characters in the *Mother* series history. Itoi answers, stating, "I figure that because there are handicapped people in our world, it would also be part of the world of *MOTHER 3*. After all, there's no way that any two people have the same physique or even the same personality… …The *MOTHER 3* world is all about having friends like them. Perhaps you could call them symbols of not rejecting such people" (Nindori). When I read as a teenager, it changed my outlook on creating characters, teaching me that our world can be a mirror for the stories we tell– imperfect and genuine, both in the story's setting and the people who make up it. The Chicken, as well as every character, help embody this ideology.

Also of note, I felt it was important to have "normal" women characters in my work– that is to say, treating them as people with depth and complexity. I wanted to design women who aren't there just as male-gaze-pleasers or as plot devices– unfortunate things you'd see so commonly in the media. Women of all types exist in fandom spaces just as they

do in our world, yet tend to be overshadowed by men– on both creator and participant levels. This is something that needs to change, and part of the change can begin with writing women as actual people rather than objects.

Character #07 - Hyena.

Fig. 46, Dave Saunders*, Character #07 - Hyena,* 2023 - 2025, Digital Drawing.

The Hyena (see fig. 46) was built to be a composite character of many masculine, older artists I've learned from and befriended in these fandom spaces. A fair portion of these individuals are gay or bisexual men in their late 30's to late 40's, and many of them have a specialized, unique skill set tailored to a specific medium or method. His backstory is also a composite of the life tales I've heard from these artists, often told to friends as they explained techniques or created art themselves. The Hyena realized he was different long ago in his life, but took many years to find the right words for what exactly he was feeling or identifying with. He shares his love of outer space and the cosmos through passionate writing and artwork. When he isn't working or creating, he's making snacks for friends and inviting them to stay the night for some stargazing.

The Hyena's visual style takes from cozy, home-baker patterns and colors– complete with classical painter clothing, blanketed by a hand-stitched apron featuring planets and a cabin in the pine forest. Although the most simplistic in character design, the design was intentionally kept basic to retain a sweet "plainness" of character. He represents a deceptively modest individual, that when given a chance to open up and tell his stories, is as vast and vibrant as the cosmos– or as personal and resonant as a campfire marshmallow roast with friends. His species was chosen due to a lot of these people having canine sonas, and hyenas emit "laughing" sounds– perfect for bad jokes.

Character #08 - Lion. Character #09 - Possum. Character #10 - Snake.

Calling
Fitness Coach, Biker

Pronouns
He/Him

Favorite Things
Tabletop RPGs
Long Drives
Eggplant Parmesan
Watching Documentaries

Fig. 47, Dave Saunders, *Character #08 - Lion,* 2019 - 2025, Digital Drawing.

Fig. 48, Dave Saunders*, Character #09 - Possum,* 2023 - 2025, Digital Drawing.

Fig. 49, Dave Saunders*, Character #10 - Snake,* 2023 - 2025, Digital Drawing.

The trio of the Lion, the Possum, and the Snake (see fig. 47, fig. 48, fig. 49) all represent three unique individuals as part of a closed polyamorous relationship. Inspired

by both poly trios and my own encounters with the subject, I created this poly unit of characters to reflect the happiest moments of my own past dealing with poly relationships, as well as to represent them in a healthy, normalized way– poly relationships being a subject the media tends to villainize. Originally created for a storyboarding class animatic, each of their species were chosen to break down the idea of "expectations". As they all are based on animals that hunt others and are typically seen as fearful or dangerous especially in the wild, it was a unique design challenge. These "typical" expected behaviors are not present, and are in fact in direct contrast to their approachable and friendly nature as characters, and this interplay is part of the "don't judge a book by its cover" project theme.

Each character represents a different subculture regarding the ideal of "self acceptance" The Lion finds discipline and self-improvement through learning kung-fu and working toward his ideal body. Grief of a prior relationship led him to seek a new calling, and finding martial arts allowed him to recover and find passion once again, aided by assisting in teaching others fitness. His design takes a page from the loose fitting, bad-boy spike-clad clothing found in fitness culture– albeit without the usually-attached toxic masculinity or misogyny.

The Possum found their calling at their first underground concert. Inspired by the lead singer, they cast off labels and embraced counterculture, living by a "I am me, and I am content with this" mentality. They find discipline and resolve through making music, singing, embracing fashion, and assisting bands during their summer roadie job. Their design is inspired by "pastel punk" styles, punk rock fashion, and "edgy" fashions of the 2000's, including styles built on pleather, chains, belts, fingerless gloves, and jeans.

The Snake's realization occurred in an anime convention, where she saw all sorts of people– many genders, bodies, and styles, all valued equal. This event gave her the courage to be herself, and she was finally able to come out as trans to her partners, who accepted her wholeheartedly. She embodies this courage and passion through her fan-creations, making artwork and fanfiction, coupled with doing volunteer work within

her fandom. Her design takes cues from anime subculture and stereotypical "nerdy" cozy, casual clothing you might see anime convention-attendees wear.

All three characters each continue their passions independently, yet together as a unit, working and traveling alongside each other as a beloved trio of partners, happily in love, and making ends meet, together.

Character #11 - Sabertooth Cat.

Fig. 50, Dave Saunders, *Character #11 - Sabertooth Cat,* 2021 - 2025, Digital Drawing

The Sabertooth Cat (see fig. 50) was a prior sona character created for a 3D project, who then transformed into his own entity. Although less sona and more OC, I consider him to be more self-reflective of myself than the other characters (sans the Skunkbunny).

His demeanour and attitude toward life was directly inspired by feelings I experienced during major life changes and relationship shifts during my journey through the graduate program. He's designed to be a paragon of accepting change through calmness and

approachability. As for his character– when he isn't listening to the troubles of others and soothing the souls of his friends, he spends his free time learning how to brew the best coffee and tea- for both himself and his visitors. It's when he embraced his gift of helping and listening to others that he truly learned how to listen (and love) himself. By casting off fear, he embraced his own identity.

His species and design both pull from tropes of "cat beast-person" fantasy races, such as the Tabaxi of *Dungeons and Dragons*, the Khajiit of *The Elder Scrolls*, and the Hrothgar of *Final Fantasy*. I felt a sabertooth cat would be a fun spin on a "gentle giant" theming– the calmest librarian who listens to your problems; he's listening while sporting a large frame, claws, and teeth– all for decoration (and hugs) only. The Sabertooth Cat's attire of a kimono jacket, rolled-up sweatpants, and glasses is inspired by the beach-going intellectual type of person, being someone who lives by the coast and enjoys the outside while remaining entirely bookish and inquisitive. Patterns on the jacket and shirt are inspired by Chinese and Japanese pottery, and the loose-fitting, western-market breathable 2010's fabrics that often featured these types of patterns.

Character #12 - Robot.

Fig. 51, Dave Saunders*, Character #12 - Robot,* 2020 - 2025, Digital Render.

Originally, The Robot (see fig. 51) was to serve as the sole avatar character of *Like Stars in a Tide Pool*: a vessel for the player to indwell and navigate around the game-world through. A robotic character was originally chosen to act as the player character for two reasons; robots are inherently semi-fantastical at-times-genderless beings who humans love to project on to, and I wished to pay home to *Wall-E,* a film whose various robot designs challenged portrayal of robotic anthropomorphism in fiction.

However, once I began to flesh out their character, the Robot became their own entity much like the other characters. Because aromatic and asexual friends of mine exist, I felt the Robot also shared these traits. I then wove the elements of being a "window to the game world" into their backstory, making it so they could allow other people (and characters) to "screen share"– even though I no longer wish to make them the player character. As the Robot goes on their journey, they invite individuals to spectate, viewing the world through their eyes. Their story is as follows: created to guide others through virtual worlds, they do their best to show others the wonder of virtual space—

while adventuring, they care for animals and wildlife. By letting others see the world through their eyes, they hope to grow the seeds of understanding as they witness stories and lives from all across time.

Their design began as a mechanical rabbit schematic created for a prompt challenge from a furry friend group. The art challenge's theme was "mecha" as in giant robots, akin to those found in robot-themed anime or the *Transformers* series. I liked the design enough to rebuild it in 3D for a modeling class, which is where the model of the current player model is derived from. Inspired by transparent plastic and see-through components of 2000's and 1990's computers and technology, the Robot features high-saturation pastel colors, transparent plastic, and a CRT monitor design.
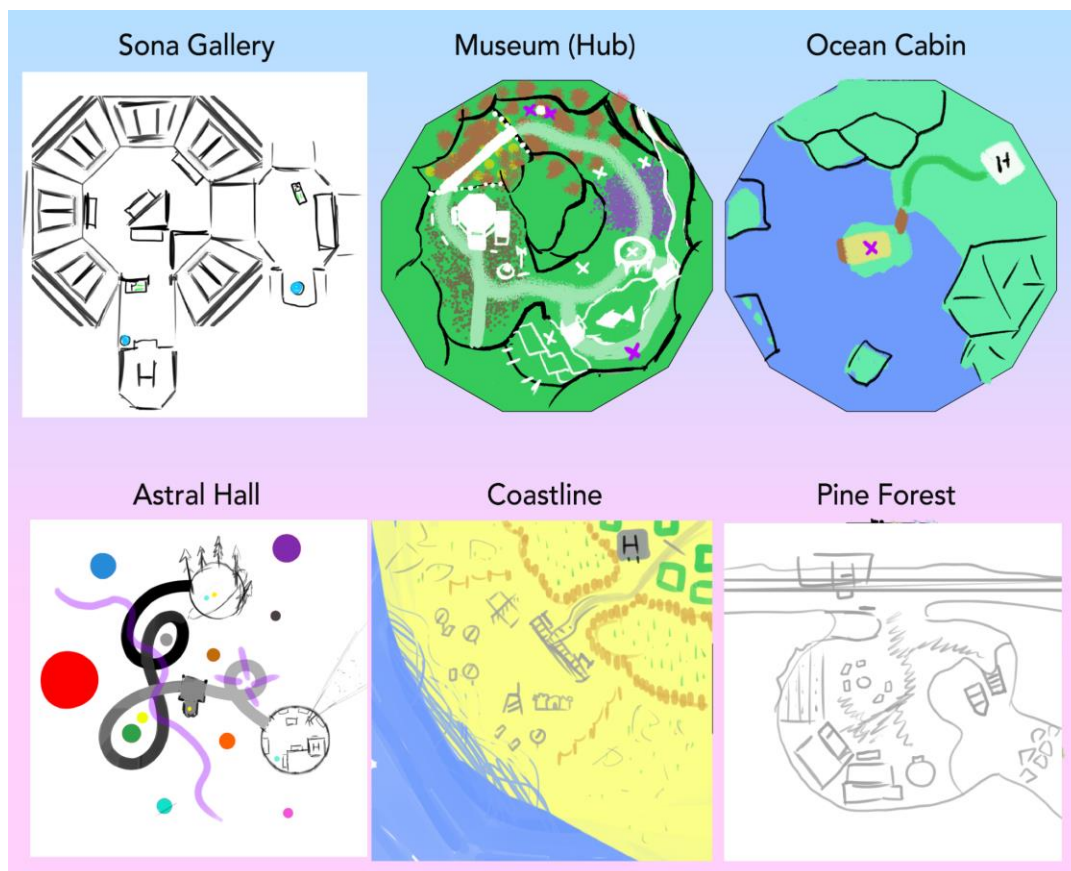
Environment and Area Designs

Fig. 52, Dave Saunders*, Like Stars in a Tide Pool - Area Design Blueprints,* 2023 - 2025, Digital Artwork.

Inside the *LSTATP game itself (Like Stars in a Tide Pool)*, there are six major "areas"– unique, discernable environments that house different locales for the player to explore (see fig. 52). Two of these areas are nearly complete as of writing, with the remaining areas still being filled out and worked on in-game. The *Museum Gallery & Garden* is the hub where the player first ends up, and they can jump inside the different gold-framed paintings within the gallery building itself to be transported to the five remaining areas, an homage to a similar mechanic from *Super Mario 64* (see fig. 53). Each of the areas has a specific theme, season, biome, and feel. The *Museum Gallery & Garden* features a daytime scene with an abstract building surrounded by sculptures, nature, and water– with half the area map being summer, the other half being autumn.

Fig. 53, Dave Saunders*, Like Stars in a Tide Pool,* 2023 - 2025, Video Game Screenshot.

Fig. 54, Dave Saunders*, Like Stars in a Tide Pool,* 2023 - 2025, Video Game Screenshot.

Crystal clear water can be seen shimmering to the horizon from inside the cozy walls of the cliffside cabin of the *Lakehouse* (see fig. 55). The A*stral Hall* features planetoids, an orbital space station, and a path made of stardust, all set within deep space– soon to be joined by a stargazing section. The *Coastline* sports a sandy beach in summer, skies clear and ocean water rippling against the shore (see fig. 54). In the future, the *Pine Mountain* will house a cozy farming and cooking enclosure amidst a canopy of snow-covered trees. To bookend the hub area, the *Exhibition Hall* will be added, which will house snapshots showcasing all of the characters living their lives, moments captured in time– fandom, subculture, family, friends, and partners; all in celebration. Each area is built to be cozy, comforting, and assist in the goal of wanting to capture quiet moments: something we don't see enough of subcultures or the media, and something we've come to value less in our everyday lives.

Fig. 55, Dave Saunders*, Like Stars in a Tide Pool,* 2023 - 2025, Video Game Screenshot.

Design wise, I was drawn to environments of lush, yet grounded, virtual places and areas– as seen in titles like *Sonic Adventure, Sonic Adventure 2, Pikmin 2, Outer Wilds, Luigi's Mansion,* and *Super Smash Bros. Melee. All of these titles feature fantasy depictions of real-world locales*– areas like modern cities, mountain ranges, outer space, gardens, temples, beaches, mansions. Each area within these titles was hand-crafted by the development team to harmonize gameplay and aesthetics to create a believable world– something I strive to do as well.

LSTATP itself lacks violence, weapons, or combat– opting to focus on talking to non-player characters, aimless freeform exploration, and varied visual design. One of the first *LEGO* computer games, *Lego Island,* featured similar themes of area exploration, curiosity, and character interactions– something that I've been inspired by since I played it as a child. Partly "walking simulators", both *Island* and *LSTATP* feature open, exploration portions where the "gameplay" is built between the area and who interacts in it– something I deliberately chose to emphasize the narrative and experiential diversity of video games as a medium.

Conclusion

Fig. 56, Dave Saunders*, Like Stars in a Tide Pool - Postcard Cover,* 2025, Video Game Screenshot and Digital Artwork Composite.

I am a storyteller. My entire life, I've strived to inspire others by creating artworks and projects that resonate with others– with the hope they themselves will use this inspiration to change the world, be it through small and big things alike– and find my own joy and contentment in doing so.

This thesis marks a cornerstone in the newest cycle of my life-long portfolio, and hones in on showcasing narratives of queerness, trans individuals, non-standard gender expression, identity celebration, and communities formed around subcultures (see fig. 56). Through *Like Stars in a Tide Pool*, I let all these aspects mingle and lift eachother up within the framework of an interactive video game. This project let me combine my love of pixel art, character design, game design, and narrative within a unifying container: a combination of multiple mediums I've learned over my life, with a gentle yet undeniable coat of queer-coding applied on top. All these are things I've found within myself, members of my found family, and life's journey– as I've opened up to who I really am, afraid of myself no longer *(see fig. 57)*.

Fig. 57, Anthony Borno (@anthony_rborno), *Rice Garden 2025 - Meetup - Group Photo*, 2025, Photograph.

Outside of academia, I am chipping away at my own indie video games, projects, and collaborations. As these projects grow and evolve, I find more opportunities to work alongside co-contributors and networked individuals as a game designer– from lore consultant to asset artist. I feel this is my calling. Now that I have reached the terminus of the MFA degree program, I will head into a multifaceted career of teaching as a

digital art professor at the college level– while taking freelance work in the indie game design sphere in my non-academic time.

Going forward, my dream is to bring *Like Stars in a Tide Pool* to a new dimension. One day, my hope and goal would be transforming my thesis from a one-time show Queer Video Game | Virtual Reality | Augmented Reality traveling exhibit– to be an multiplayer-based exhibit that can evolve, educate, and enlighten. To be a curated place of artwork and celebration that can spark the queerer, kinder thoughts in minds– minds of those who can start to change the world for the better, both big and small. This kind of project expansion would require a programmer and additional artists, as it is beyond the scope of a solo project for me– a step I would be happy to take forward together with a team, should the opportunity arrive. Independently, I also wish to reimagine, incorporate, and re-house aspects, characters, stories, and places from *Like Stars in a Tide Pool* into other projects I create. This will allow the found-family of characters I've made and the tales they tell to continue to evolve. Through this metamorphosis, they will take on new contexts, reach new audiences, and advance as a concept over my lifetime, alongside my body of work– and is that not emblematic of *Like Stars in a Tide Pool* itself?

To note on the topic of video game software as art, I raise the answer of Gesamtkunstwerk again, per my dive into *Super Mario 64*'s status as one of the first mainstream titles to truly transcend the medium's perceived public limitations. Video games are "new" types of art, and the interaction between artwork and audience is even more sacred and crucial in the context of the lens of "seeing" interactive media as valid artforms, including video games. Arguments abound partly because of the ludologic-focused and directional nature of video games, yet this argument falters: art by many hands rather than by only one individual is still art, especially when each component is crafted by humans rather than machines alone.

Fig. 58, Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds,* 2010 - 2011, image via Tate's *Modern Exhibition Galleries* Website, individual seeds of painted sculpted porcelain.

Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* is a contemporary example from current gallery spaces of "high" art that embodies this concept (see fig. 58). In the same way each sunflower seed is a hand-sculpted, hand-painted porcelain "unit" made by a person who is tasked with creating for "the end result", coming together with many other "units" to make something grander, stronger, and collectively more impactful as a "unified work" under a "director"; *Sunflower Seeds* is also emblematic of the hopes, dreams, and cultural voices of those who worked on creating it. So too, could *Super Mario 64*, or any video game for that matter, be seen as a collection of hand-crafted "units" unified together under the vision of a director.

Fig. 59, Rirkrit Tiravanija, u*ntitled (Free/Still) [2011 installation], 2011 - 2014*, image via Museum of Modern Art's *MoMA* Website, Performance Art Exhibition.

And what of performance art where the audience interacts with the art, or the interaction itself is the art, such as Rirkrit Tiravanija's *untitled (Free/Still)* (see fig. 59), wherein Tiravanjia cooked and served homemade meals to audiences, engaged in a conversation with the audience over Thai curry, all while eating at the same table together? Just as the director (or artist) and/or contributors working on projects become intimately acquainted with the process of "making", the audience takes away something even more unique: the intangible yet instrumental experience of witnessing, bearing the artwork for the very first time, cementing itself as something that can be returned to, in the mind or in the real world, in different places in different ages in one's life– yet, the echoes of the first witnessing ring true: be it resonance with one's own creation, resonance with other art, and resonance from art to audience, are all keystones of all art– the forms and vessels they take merely change as our world changes: video game or art gallery, *Mario 64* or Mozart's *No. 6*, digital dreamworld or Dalí painting. And that is the beauty of the "dance" of human history, is it not?

And thus, this thesis, in short; I live for that "dance"– to be beheld solo, to remix, or join in unison: amidst those who wish to "dance" to their own melodies as their truest selves,

all a part of the never-ending celebration: dreams being dreamed, and dreams being made real– where we find ourselves, and we find each other.

Bibliography

Adams, Laurie. *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction*. Routledge, 2018.

Alexandra, Heather. "Famous Super Mario 64 Trick Involving Parallel Universes Finally Becomes Real." Kotaku, 11 Apr. 2017, kotaku.com/the-famous-super-mario-64-trick-involving-parallel-univ-1794215869. Accessed 14 May 2024.

Anderson, Wes. *The Making of Fantastic Mr. Fox: A Film by Wes Anderson Based on the Book by Roald Dahl Wes Anderson, Roald Dahl*. Rizzoli, 2009.

Aonuma, Eiji, et al. *The Legend of Zelda: Hyrule Historia*. Translated by Michael Gombos, Dark Horse Books, 2013.

Archive6487. "Super Mario 128 (Tech Demo Direct Feed)"*, YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3h2E6CGV3HQ. Accessed 13 Apr. 2025.

Archive of Our Own. "Organization for Transformative Works, AO3" Archive of Our Own, archiveofourown.org. Accessed 24 Apr. 2025.

Barbo, Maria S. *The Official Pokémon Handbook*. Scholastic, Inc, 1999.

Bean, Anthony M. *The Psychology of Pokemon: The Power to Catch 'Em All*. Leyline Publishing, Inc, 2022.

Bolotnikova, Marina N. "Crows Know How to Have Fun." Harvard Magazine, 1 May 2020, www.harvardmagazine.com/2019/08/crows-know-how-to-have-fun.

Burton, Charlie. "Inside the Mind of Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto, the Man Who Made Mario." British GQ, 8 Feb. 2017, gq-magazine.co.uk/article/shigeru-miyamoto-interview. Accessed 14 May 2024.

"Cows Play and Have Best Friends - but Are Rarely given the Chance." Sentient, 9 Jan. 2024, sentientmedia.org/do-cows-play/.

De Gortari, A. Ortiz, and A. Basche. "Pain and Gain of Auditory Intrusions with Video Game Content: Game Transfer Phenomena in Clinical Cases." European Psychiatry, Cambridge University Press, 13 Aug. 2021, ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9479913/. Accessed 14 May 2024.

Docter, Pete, and Domee Shi. *The Art of Turning Red*. Chronicle Books LLC, 2022.

D'Lacey, Chris. *The Fire Within*. Scholastic Inc, 2007.

Eckstut, Joann, and Arielle Eckstut. *The Secret Language of Color: Science, Nature, History, Culture, Beauty of Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue & Violet*. Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers : Distributed by Workman Publishing Company, 2013.

Edwards, Patrick, et al. *Meet the Bronies: The Psychology of the Adult My Little Pony Fandom*. McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2019.

Epstein, Mike. "The Smithsonian Has Picked the Games of Its Art of Video Games Exhibit." Kotaku, 5 May 2011, kotaku.com/the-smithsonian-has-picked-the-games-of-its-art-of-vide-5799017. Accessed 14 May 2024.

Fey, Tina, et al. *The Art of Soul*. Chronicle Books, 2020.

Foster, Hal, et al. *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*. Thames & Hudson, 2020.

geN8hedgehog, Furry Sonic OC Dollmaker, 2006, DeviantART Submission, Flash. deviantart.com/gen8hedgehog/art/Gen-s-Furrie-Dollmaker-v1-0-37671687

General Zoi, *Pony Creator*, 2011, DeviantART Submission, Flash. https://www.deviantart.com/generalzoi/art/Pony-Creator-Full-Version-254295904

Gentile, D. A., Anderson, C. A., Yukawa, S., Ihori, N., Saleem, M., Lim Kam Ming, Shibuya, A., Liau, A. K., Khoo, A., Bushman, B. J., Rowell Huesmann, L., & Sakamoto, A. (2009). The Effects of Prosocial Video Games on Prosocial Behaviors: International Evidence From Correlational, Longitudinal, and Experimental Studies. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 35(6), 752-763. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167209333045

"Gesamtkunstwerk - Modern Art Terms and Concepts." The Art Story, www.theartstory.org/definition/gesamtkunstwerk. Accessed 24 Apr. 2025.

Harrison, Edward, and John Harrison. *Fuzz & Fur: Japan's Costumed Characters*. Mark Batty ; Distributed Outside North America by Thames & Hudson, 2010.

Hauser, Tim, and Andrew Stanton. *The Art of Wall-E*. Chronicle Books LLC, 2015.

Hayaj / Tongari Goat, *Cat-based JK maker*, Unknown Year, Picrew App, HTML5. picrew.me/en/image_maker/2360838

Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Taylor and Francis, 2012.

"He crossed the screen and entered pop culture": the genesis of Super Mario 64, the video game that changed everything. CE Noticias Financieras, Translated by ContentEngine, L. L. C. (2021, Aug 02). ezproxy.wpunj.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/he-crossed-screen-entered-pop-culture-genesis/docview/2557789741/se-2.

Hernandez, Patricia. "A Giant Super Mario 64 Hack That Reinvents the Game." Kotaku, 3 Oct. 2016, kotaku.com/a-giant-super-mario-64-hack-that-reinvents-the-game-1787352921. Accessed 14 May 2024.

Hernandez, Patricia. "Fans Celebrate as Nintendo Gigaleak Validates Super Mario 64 Luigi Myth." Polygon, 27 July 2020, polygon.com/2020/7/27/21340133/nintendo-gigaleak-luigi-l-is-real-super-mario-64-myth-conspiracy-theory-files. Accessed 14 May 2024.

Hernandez, Patricia. "In 2020, Super Mario 64 Has Been Reborn as a Horror Game." Polygon, 15 Sept. 2020, polygon.com/2020/9/15/21437962/super-mario-64-iceberg-creepypasta-machinima-every-copy-is-personalized-nintendo-64. Accessed 14 May 2024.

Hodgson, David S. J. Official Game Guide: The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim. Prima Games, 2011.

Hogeweg, Stan. "Super Mario 64: What Does L Is Real 2401 Mean." Game Rant, 20 Sept. 2021, gamerant.com/super-mario-64-l-is-real-2401-meaning/.

Hollinger, Elizabeth. *Pokémon Ruby Version, Sapphire Version: Prima's Official Strategy Guide*. Prima Games, 2003.

Hopkins, David. *After Modern Art: 1945-2017*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

Hurley, Kalikolehua, et al. *The Art of Raya and the Last Dragon*. Chronicle Books, 2021.

"Hypnagogic Images in Normals and Amnesics." Science (New York, N.Y.), U.S. National science.org/doi/10.1126/science.290.5490.350. Accessed 15 May 2024.

Iwata, Satoru, and Sam Bett. *Ask Iwata: Words of Wisdom from Satoru Iwata, Nintendo's Legendary CEO*. VIZ Media, LLC, 2021.

"Iwata Asks" - *Iwata Asks: Super Mario Galaxy 2,* iwataasks.nintendo.com/interviews/wii/supermariogalaxy2/0/0/. Accessed 14 May 2024.

"Iwata Asks" - *Iwata Asks: Shigeru Miyamoto, (Super Mario Galaxy)* iwataasks.nintendo.com/interviews/wii/super_mario_galaxy/3/2/. Accessed 14 May 2024.

"Iwata Asks" - *Iwata Asks: Super Mario Developers,* iwataasks.nintendo.com/interviews/wii/mario25th/3/0/. Accessed 14 May 2024.

JasperRLZ, *Noclip, A Digital Museum of Video Game Levels.*, noclip.website/. Accessed 24 Mar. 2025.

JQHN, "Tatsuro Yamashita - For You But With Super Mario 64 Soundfont", *YouTube*, youtube.com/watch?v=dQYjJC4L69M. Accessed 13 Apr. 2025.

Julius, Jessica. *The Art of Zootopia*. Chronicle Books, 2016.

Juul, Jesper. *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players*. MIT Press, 2012.

Juul, Jesper. *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. MIT Press, 2011.

Koster, Raph. *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*. O'Reilly Media Inc, 2014.

Kühn, S, et al. "Playing Super Mario Induces Structural Brain Plasticity: Gray Matter
	Changes Resulting from Training with a Commercial Video Game." Nature News,
	Nature Publishing Group, 29 Oct. 2013, nature.com/articles/mp2013120.
	Accessed 14 May 2024.

Kubler, George. The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things. Yale
	University Press, 2008.

"L Is Real 2401." Mario Mysteries Wiki, Fandom, Inc.,
	mariomystery.fandom.com/wiki/L_is_real_2401. Accessed 24 Apr. 2025.

"L Is Real//Eternal Star." L Is 133t, 12 Apr. 2009,
	lis133t.wordpress.com/l-is-realeternal-star/. Accessed 24 Apr. 2025.

"Let's Debate the Merits of Super Mario Sunshine." Kotaku, 29 Sept. 2020,
	kotaku.com/lets-debate-the-merits-of-super-mario-sunshine-1845215692.

Library of Medicine, pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/11030656/. Accessed 14 May 2024.

Littlechild, Chris. "3D All-Stars: 10 Things We Wish We Knew before Starting Super
	Mario Galaxy." TheGamer, 18 Sept. 2020,
	thegamer.com/nintendo-3d-all-stars-super-mario-galaxy-things-wish-we-knew-
	before-starting/.

Lopez, Napier. "Someone Ported Super Mario 64 to Play in a Browser (Again)."
	TheNextWeb.Com [BLOG], Newstex, 2021.
	thenextweb.com/news/super-mario-64-in-bowser.

Lopoddity, *Pokesona: Trash Rat,* 2016, via DeviantArt, digital artwork.
	deviantart.com/lopoddity/art/Pokesona-Trash-Rat-627883285.

McDonnell, Chris, et al. Steven Universe: Art & Origins. Abrams, 2017.

McFerran, Damien. "Valve's Gabe Newell Thinks Super Mario 64 Is Just Swell."
	Nintendo Life, 6 Mar. 2014,
	nintendolife.com/news/2014/03/valves_gabe_newell_thinks_super_mario_64_is_
	just_swell. Accessed 14 May 2024.

Miller-Zarneke, Tracey. *The Art of How to Train Your Dragon*. Titan, 2010.

Morris, Meghan. "Super Mario Odyssey Reminds Students of Mario 64 and Other 3D
Mario Games." University Wire, Uloop, Inc, 2017.

Morrisseau, Norval, Man Changing into Thunderbird, 1977." Art Canada Institute -
Institut de l'art Canadien,
aci-iac.ca/art-books/norval-morrisseau/key-works/man-changing-into-thunderbird.
Accessed 14 Apr. 2025.

Nadine Burke Harris, M.D. *The Deepest Well: Healing the Long-Term Effects of
Childhood Trauma and Adversity*. Mariner Books, 2018.

NcKlol. "Super Mario 64 VRChat World!", *YouTube*,
youtube.com/watch?v=OidvmQ67-8Q. Accessed 13 Apr. 2025.

NeoGamer. "Pikmin - E3 2001 Beta Trailer [High Quality]", *YouTube*,
youtube.com/watch?v=Z_xkiaHXHmE. Accessed 13 Apr. 2025.

Nindori.Com - Itoi Interview, Nintendo Dream, Fobby.Net (Translation),
mother3.fobby.net/interview/m3int_04.html. Accessed 24 Mar. 2025.

"Nintendo Talks Pikmin 2 and Mario 128." IGN, 16 June 2012,
ign.com/articles/2002/12/10/nintendo-talks-pikmin-2-and-mario-128. Accessed
14 May 2024.

onemegawatt, *untitled*, 2018, via Twitter, digital artwork. onemegawatt.carrd.co/

Ortiz de Gortari, Angelica B, and Jayne Gackenbach. "Game Transfer Phenomena
and Problematic Interactive Media Use: Dispositional and Media Habit Factors."
Frontiers in Psychology, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 22 Apr. 2021,
ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8100040/. Accessed 14 May 2024.

Pannenkoek2012, "HMC Watch for Rolling Rocks 0xa." *YouTube*, 1 Oct. 2023,
youtube.com/watch?v=kpk2tdsPh0A. Accessed 14 May 2024.

Porterfield, Deborah. "Profile: 'Mario' Creator Shares His Vision." Gannett News
Service, USA Today, a division of Gannett Satellite Information Network, Inc,
2002, pp.

PIKMIN Olimar No Wakusei Kansatsuki; (オリマーの惑星観察記:
ピクミン完全攻略ガイド).エンターブレイン, 2001.

Plante, Courtney N., Stephen Reysen, Camielle Adams, et al. *Furscience: A Decade of Psychological Research on the Furry Fandom*. International Anthropomorphic Research Project, 2023.

Plante, Courtney N., Roberts, S., Stephen Reysen, & Gerbasi, K. (2014). "One of Us": Engagement with Fandoms and Global Citizenship Identification. Psychology of Popular Media Culture, 3, 1, 49-64. doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000008.

Plante, Courtney N., Stephen Reysen, Thomas R. Brooks, et al. *CAPE: A Multidimensional Model of Fan Interest*. CAPE Model Research Team, 2021.

Plunkett, Luke. "24 People Can Now Play Super Mario 64 Online Together." Kotaku, 11 Sept. 2017, kotaku.com/24-people-can-now-play-super-mario-64-online-together-1803112939. Accessed 14 May 2024.

Preziosi, Donald. *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

purpleorange, *Untitled Gemsona Chart,* 2017, Posted via Tumblr, digital artwork. purpleorange.tumblr.com/post/157826506328/finally-made-a-chart-for-my-11-gemsonasbut

República, La. "Super Mario 64: Luigi Aparece En Código Fuente Del Videojuego y Fans Se Emocionan [Fotos]." Últimas Noticias Del Perú y El Mundo En Larepublica.Pe, larepublica.pe/videojuegos/2020/07/27/super-mario-64-luigi-hermano-de-mario-bros-aparece-en-el-codigo-fuente-del-videojuego-de-nintendo-fotos-video. Accessed 24 Apr. 2025.

Retro Gamer, et al. "Super Mario 64 Turns 25: Examining the Impact of the N64's Most Revolutionary Game." Gamesradar, GamesRadar+, 23 June 2021, gamesradar.com/super-mario-64-turns-25-examining-the-impact-of-the-n64-most-revolutionary-game/. Accessed 14 May 2024.

Rirkrit Tiravanija: Cooking up an Art Experience, Rirkrit Tiravanija. Untitled (Free/Still). 1992/1995/2007/2011- | Moma. moma.org/collection/works/147206, moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/02/03/rirkrit-tiravanija-cooking-up-an-art-experience/. Accessed 15 May 2024.

Sickr, et al. "Valve Founder Gabe Newell Loves Miyamoto and Super Mario 64." My Nintendo News, 7 Apr. 2012, mynintendonews.com/2012/04/07/valve-founder-gabe-newell-loves-miyamoto-and-super-mario-64/. Accessed 14 May 2024.

Sikorski, Joy. *Squeaky Chalk*. Crown Publishers, 2000.

Soria, Agustin, and Julian Maldonado. *Computer Games: Learning Objectives, Cognitive Performance and Effects on Development*, Nova Science Publishers, Incorporated, 2010. pp. 128.

Spear, Rebecca. "Super Mario 3D All-Stars: Super Mario 64 Myths, Lore, and Conspiracy Theories." iMore, 20 Sept. 2020, imore.com/super-mario-3d-all-stars-super-mario-64-myths-and-lore. Accessed 14 May 2024.

Stevoisiak. "B3313 v1.0.2: Dry Town - All Stars", *YouTube*, youtube.com/watch?v=JwMFqIKs3K4. Accessed 13 Apr. 2025.

Sunny064. "L Was Real", *YouTube*, youtube.com/watch?v=Q7Yr54dqPAc. Accessed 14 Apr. 2025. Cover Art by Radicube.

"120 Star by Cheese05 in 1:45:19 - GDQX2018." *YouTube, 1*4 Nov. 2018, youtube.com/watch?v=LV7SsyTI4u4. Accessed 14 May 2024.

Steer, Dugald A. *The Dragonology Handbook*. Candlewick Press, 2005.

Stoddard, Tim. *Furtannia the History of the Furry Fandom in the United Kingdom*. Uncle Bear Publishing, LLC, 2023.

Strike, Joe. *Furry Nation: The True Story of America's Most Misunderstood Subculture*. Cleis Press, 2017.

Strike, Joe. *Furry Planet: A World Gone Wild*. Apollo Publishers, 2023.

Sugii, Gisaburō, director. *Arashi No Yoru Ni*. Group TAC, 2005.

"Super Mario 3D All-Stars - News - Nintendo Official Site." Super Mario 3D All-Stars - News - Nintendo Official Site, nintendo.com/us/whatsnew/super-mario-3d-all-stars-leaves-nintendo-eshop-on-march-31st/. Accessed 24 Apr. 2025.

"Super Mario 64 II." IGN, ign.com/games/super-mario-64-ii. Accessed 14 May 2024.

"Super Mario Sunshine: Development Staff Interview (Archived)." Wayback Machine,

Nintendo, 17 Dec. 2002,

web.archive.org/web/20070821183704/www.nintendo.co.jp/nom/0208/sms_inte/

page02.html#02.

TATE. "'Sunflower Seeds', Ai Weiwei, 2010." Tate, 1 Jan. 1970,

tate.org.uk/art/artworks/ai-sunflower-seeds-t13408.

Accessed 14 May 2024.

Tatsuro Yamashita. *For You*, Yutopia.or.Jp, 1982,

yutopia.or.jp/~oouchi/ty/01discography/08foryou.html. Accessed 24 Apr. 2025.

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings Illustrated Edition*. Mariner Books, 2021.

"25 Years Ago, Super Mario 64 Rocketed Nintendo into the Third Dimension."

PCMAG, pcmag.com/news/25-years-ago-super-mario-64-rocketed-nintendo-into-

the-third-dimension. Accessed 14 May 2024.

Twentys Hell, *Pink Squad, 2022* via FurAffinity, digital artwork.

furaffinity.net/view/47250544/

u/asssmonkeee. "The Ancients of VRChat", *Reddit*,

reddit.com/r/VRchat/comments/mzz84z/the_ancients_of_vrchat_had

_out_best_meetup_yet/. Accessed 13 Apr. 2025.

VGCartography. "Super Mario 64: Peach's Castle Map by VGCartography."

DeviantArt, deviantart.com/vgcartography/art/Super-Mario-64-Peach-s-Castle-

Map-896674352. Accessed 14 Apr. 2025.

Wakabayashi, Hiro Clark. *Lilo & Stitch: Collected Stories from the Film's Creators*.

Disney Editions, 2002.

"Wario Apparition." MIPS Hole Wiki, Fandom, Inc.,

sm64-conspiracies.fandom.com/wiki/Wario_Apparition. Accessed 24 Apr. 2025.

West, Greg L., et al. "Playing Super Mario 64 Increases Hippocampal Grey Matter in

Older Adults." PloS One, vol. 12, no. 12, 2017, pp. E0187779–e0187779,

doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0187779.

Williams, Leah J. "What Is the Super Mario 64 Conspiracy Theory Iceberg?" Kotaku

      Australia, 20 Sept. 2020,

      kotaku.com.au/2020/09/super-mario-64-iceberg-conspiracy-theories/.

      Accessed 14 May 2024.

Young Thug. "Young Thug's Tweet on Twitter." "but Fuck It We Ball!!!" ,

      twitter.com/youngthug/status/664207204975845376. Accessed 24 Mar. 2025.

Yin-Poole, Wesley. "Same Sex Marriage in Skyrim." Eurogamer.Net, Eurogamer.net,

      22 Oct. 2011, eurogamer.net/same-sex-marriage-in-skyrim.

Zabor, Rafi. *The Bear Comes Home*. Norton, 1998.

ZeldaCentral. "Zelda Ocarina of Time PC Port 60 FPS - 100% Walkthrough."

      YouTube,   youtu.be/2khwB-tB0-A?si=uLrflLxuYliHOl0t. Accessed 13 Apr.

      2025.

Ludology

"Animal Crossing: New Horizons." Nintendo, 2020. Nintendo Switch Software.

"Broken Reality." Dynamic Media Triad, 2018. PC, Indie Game Software.
store.steampowered.com/app/757480/Broken_Reality/.

"B3313 1.0 (Final Official Release)." B3313 Team, 2024. PC,
Nintendo 64 Fan-Mod Software. romhacking.com/hack/b3313-super-mario-64-internal-plexus.

"Celeste." Maddy Makes Games, 2018. PC, Indie Game Software.
celestegame.com. store.steampowered.com/app/504230/Celeste/.

"Celeste 64: Fragments of the Mountain." by Maddy Makes Games, 2018. PC, Indie
Game Software. maddymakesgamesinc.itch.io/celeste64

"Earthbound / MOTHER 2" APE inc., HAL Laboratory, Nintendo 1995. Super Nintendo
Entertainment System Software.

"*The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim.*" Bethesda Game Studios, 2017. Nintendo Switch
Version.

"Garry's Mod." Facepunch Studios, Valve Corporation, 2006. PC Game Software.
store.steampowered.com/app/4000/Garrys_Mod/.

"Half-Life 2" Valve Corporation, 2004, 2006, 2007. Multiplatform & PC Game Software.
store.steampowered.com/app/220/HalfLife_2/.

"A Hat in Time." Gears for Breakfast. 2022. PC, Indie Game.
gearsforbreakfast.com/games/a-hat-in-time/.

"KIMAERA." DavoGato & The KIMAERA Team, Unreleased. PC, Indie Game
Software. shantystudios.com.
store.steampowered.com/app/3436890/KIMAERA/.

"The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time." Nintendo, 1998. Nintendo 64 Software.

"Lego Island." Minscape, the LEGO group, 1997. PC Game Software.

"Luigi's Mansion." Nintendo, 2001. Nintendo Gamecube Software.

"MOTHER 3" Brownie Brown, HAL Laboratory, Nintendo, 2006. Nintendo Game Boy
Advance Software.

"The Orange Box" Valve Corporation, 2007. Multiplatform & PC Game Software.
store.steampowered.com/sub/469/.

"Outer Wilds." Mobius Digital, 2019. PC, Indie Game Software.
store.steampowered.com/app/753640/Outer_Wilds/.

"Pikmin." Nintendo, 2001. Nintendo Gamecube Software.

"Pikmin 2." Nintendo, 2004. Nintendo Gamecube Software.

"Pokémon Colosseum." Nintendo, The Pokémon Company, Genius Sonority, 2004.
Nintendo Gamecube Software.

"Pokemon GO." Niantic, The Pokémon Company, 2016. Mobile App.
pokemongolive.com.

"Pokémon Sapphire Version." Nintendo, The Pokémon Company, 2002. Nintendo
Game Boy Advance Software.

"Portal" Valve Corporation, 2007. Multiplatform & PC Game Software.
store.steampowered.com/app/400/Portal/.

"Pseudoregalia" Rittz." 2023. PC, Indie Game. rittzler.itch.io/pseudoregalia.
store.steampowered.com/app/2365810/Pseudoregalia/.

"Sonic Adventure" Sonic Team, Sega, 1998. Sega Dreamcast Game Software.

"Sonic Adventure 2" Sonic Team USA, Sega, 2001. Sega Dreamcast Game Software.

"Source Filmmaker" Valve Corporation, 2012. Utility Game, Animation Software,
store.steampowered.com/app/1840/Source_Filmmaker/.

"Super Mario 64." Nintendo, 1996. Nintendo 64 Software.

"Super Mario Galaxy." Nintendo, 2007. Nintendo Wii Software.

"Super Mario Sunshine." Nintendo, 2002. Nintendo Gamecube Software.

"Super Smash Bros. Melee" HAL Labs, Nintendo, 2001. Nintendo Gamecube Software.

"Team Fortress 2" Valve Corporation, 2007. Multiplatform & PC Game Software.
teamfortress.com., store.steampowered.com/app/440/Team_Fortress_2/.

"Undertale." Toby Fox. 2015. PC, Indie Game Software. undertale.com
store.steampowered.com/app/391540/Undertale/.

"WEBFISHING." lamedeveloper, 2024. PC, Indie Game Software.
store.steampowered.com/app/3146520/WEBFISHING.