

**Viewing Games from Without:  
Queering Procedural Subjectivity in *The Novelist***



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**Disclaimer:** it is common practice for games studies research to refer to players using she/her pronouns. I will conform to this practice, but I want to clarify that this is not meant to imply anything about my specific research or the people that engage with it. Secondly, I use the terms “procedural subjectivity” and “a/the procedural subjectivity” interchangeably throughout this thesis. It is my contention that these terms signify slightly different things, but are approximate enough in their meaning not to warrant a strict distinction.

**ABSTRACT:** Reviewing the literature on gender in games, and the conflicting approaches of narratology and ludology, it's clear that many essentialist binaries are still being reproduced, crippling the development of a nuanced understanding of the intersection between games and identity. In seeking to contribute to the developing field of queer game studies, this paper coins the term 'procedural subjectivity,' referring to the process whereby the mechanical composition of a game invites the player into a subject-position from which the game becomes meaningful. Building on the work of Donna Haraway, Judith Butler, and Sara Ahmed, the ways in which the formal aspects of a game can queer this procedural subjectivity are explored. The computer game *The Novelist* is then analyzed through this framework, uncovering seemingly contradictory approaches in a liberatory rejection of dominant design philosophies on the one hand, and a metaphorical simulation of the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people in precarious situations on the other. The author concludes that these conflicting knowledges can simultaneously be true, reflecting on the queer potential in refusing to be defined along congruent axes.

## INTRODUCTION

"It is a characteristic of games to render digital decisions on all shades of difference. One either wins or loses. One either hits or misses. The practice of the gamer as theorist might be to reinstall what is undecidable back into the gamespace..."

-McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (2007, 26)

The need for discussion about the relation of games to marginalized identities is well-documented, and has only become more relevant with the increased participation of women in video gaming culture (Jenson & De Castell 2010). From the early 2000s to the mid-2010s, most scholarship on the intersection between gender and gaming focused on the dual purpose of on the one hand getting girls and women interested in gaming as a consumer product, while on the other advocating for a move away from "pink games" and gender stereotypes (Jenkins & Cassell 2008). Yet even during this period, gaps in the literature were diagnosed to be a result of a fixation on gender as the defining axis along which difference was constituted. In a scathing review of the literature on women in games, Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne de Castell write: "naive gender ontologies, in which existence is bifurcated into sexes and sexes into two, necessarily interrogate the "second sex" in terms of lack" (Jenson & De Castell 2010, 52). Yasmin Kafai et al. make a similar note as they reflect on the progress of feminist game studies: "It is our contention that the dialogue about gaming is limited when gender is seen as a fixed entity [...] We contend that these are not the only possible ways to address

gender differences in game design and research” (Kafai et al. 2008, xvii). Clearly, the analysis of games through a gender-focused framework did not yield the results that many had hoped.

So, how to move forward? One option that already proved fruitful very early on in the development of the field, was a move away from a male/female divide and towards a butch/femme continuum, as was common practice in queer theory at the time (Brunner et al. 2000). This allowed scholars to discuss design tendencies in a way that accounted for the complex, contradictory and fluid ways in which people related to gender and sexuality. In the following years, this approach was expanded upon, as Jenson and De Castell note, by “recasting the purpose of gender and gaming research: very different questions and ways of answering them become possible when researchers aim to destabilize and reorganize concepts and practices, rather than describe and reauthorize them” (Jenson & De Castell 2010, 52-53). Following this principle, research shifted focus to denaturalizing gendered differences, rather than theorizing how they might be given a place within the gaming status quo.

The 2010s also saw a rise in game designers from all across the LGBTQ+ spectrum making games specifically speaking to their experience as queer authors, notably Anna Anthropy, Nicky Case, Robert Yang, Lydia Neon, micha cardenas, Amy Dentata and Mattie Brice. Merritt Kopas, herself a queer trans game designer from this period, reflects on the desire to embody these perspectives within games, by discussing the relation between the player and two characters in the groundbreaking queer game *Gone Home* (Fullbright 2013), first-person protagonist Katie and her sister Sam, a lesbian side character the player gets to know through gathered journal entries:

“Katie isn’t so much a character in *Gone Home*. She’s the camera. And for someone like me who never really felt present as a kid, who always felt like she was observing other people and never really observing herself – her own feelings, her own body – that’s kind of perfect. Here’s the thing, though: I don’t want to be Katie anymore. I want to be Sam.” (Kopas 2017, 148)

It’s clear that there was an urgency for queer game design to mature into a constructive, multi-faceted field that prioritized the expression of lived LGBTQ+ identities. As this branch of the independent games industry grew, so did the academic work underpinning it. Drawing upon more nuanced definitions of gender and identity that were developed through feminist, postmodern, poststructuralist, critical race, and queer theories (Jenson & De Castell 2010, 64) this led to the birth of what is today often referred to as queer game studies. Destabilization became a central practice in this field, to the point where the term itself didn’t seem particularly stable, as Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw lovingly describe: “queer game studies is difficult to define; this difficulty is itself highly productive for questioning the limitations of dominant conceptual frameworks”

(Ruberg & Shaw 2017, xii). While still in its infant stages, queer game studies has already built up a respectable framework for analysis of queer games, queer gaming, queering mainstream games, and queer people within the gaming industry and culture.

The purpose of this thesis is to contribute to this developing framework by analyzing and then denaturalizing the way that subjectivity is constructed procedurally in video games. My aim is to demonstrate how this lens can be used productively both to understand queerness in games that do not explicitly set out to be queer, and to expose possible avenues for game designers to constructively express queer perspectives through game design. To this end I will perform a formal textual analysis of the game *The Novelist* (Orthogonal Games 2013) by Kent Kudson, arguing how it develops and then queers what I will call a procedural subjectivity. In this analysis, I will focus on two key mechanics in the game, namely movement (how the player navigates the game environment) and stealth (how the player is challenged to move through the environment undetected by other characters). My research question is: **how does *The Novelist* establish the possibility of a queer procedural subjectivity?** To answer this question, several others must first be asked:

1. How is procedural subjectivity constructed?
2. How can procedural subjectivity be queered?
3. How is movement in *The Novelist* queer?
4. How are the stealth mechanics in *The Novelist* queer?
5. How do the movement and stealth mechanics relate to each other?

In my theory section, I will discuss the first two questions, elaborating mainly on the terms ‘procedural subjectivity’ and ‘queer.’ Then, I will answer questions three and four in my formal analysis of *The Novelist*. ‘Stealth’ in this case refers to gameplay mechanics centered around hiding and sneaking. Lastly, I will reflect on my findings and answer the fifth question. The goal is to argue for the applicability of procedural subjectivity as an analytical framework within queer game studies, by showing how it can yield useful knowledges in a case study.

I have chosen *The Novelist* for this purpose, because of two main reasons. Firstly, the game is often characterized as a ‘walking simulator,’ a genre of games that focuses on storytelling while having minimal interactive mechanics (generally no more than walking and looking around). This genre has deep ties to gender and queerness, both because it revolves around wandering, which has historically been seen as a feminine activity, and because the genre disproportionately presents stories about (queer) women; within the gaming community, the phrase ‘this isn’t a game, it’s a walking simulator’ has long been used derisively along thinly veiled axes of gender and sexuality (Kagen 2018). Secondly, *The Novelist* is set against a mostly uncritically presented backdrop of a nuclear family, making it the perfect target for the détournement-style subversion of its conformity

to patriarchal and heterosexual norms that characterizes so much of queer media criticism (Burrill 2017, 27).

In answering my research questions, I must inevitably navigate my own positionality within the topics of gender, sexuality, and play. I would first like to reflect on this, starting with a confession: I do not know how to 'properly' be queer. Perhaps, to some extent, being improperly queer is in itself the proper way to be queer, but I find it hard to consider myself an authority on this matter. Growing up with a love for stories, and video game stories in particular, there has always been a schism between these two parts of my identity, a need to consolidate the gamer (goal-oriented, rational, straight) with the queer person (wandering, embodied, anything but straight). And while the impetus for this thesis isn't purely anecdotal, I find it important to disclose that this research is necessarily tied to a deeply personal journey that I am still in the middle of. In deconstructing what it means to be a gamer, I am still deconstructing the presuppositions that I carried with me growing up. As I ask questions about storytelling and embodiment, I am also asking questions about how to properly be queer.

It is also important to disclose that I was raised as a white, heterosexual, cisgendered man, and am still certain that I actually am at least one of those things. This has afforded me huge privileges within both the academic and gaming worlds, having never been discouraged from exploring either of them. I say this not just because I think that ethical research is based on an understanding of who is speaking, but also because my formal analysis of *The Novelist* will involve my playing of the game, which in the best of cases is already a deeply subjective process. Game scholar Clara Fernández-Vara writes:

"In the case of game analysis, achieving critical distance is problematic, since the writer/player is also participating in the game. [...] In videogames, the critic also becomes a participant in the object of study; it cannot be helped. In preparing for an analysis, we have to be aware of what type of player we are, how we are tackling the game, and how that may affect our perception of the game." (Fernández-Vara 2014, 30-31)

While playing *The Novelist*, I will endeavor to make self-reflection a consistent part of my research process. I can never fully account for my own biases, but interrogating them consciously will help me navigate them productively (Lammes & De Smale 2018, 19). In addition, it is important to note that I am an experienced gamer and have developed my reflexes and spatial awareness from a young age, a process that is also gendered through toys and encouragement. My access to this text is also not restricted by any disabilities or the hardware of my computer. These characteristics, going into this investigation, are by no means a given and will not lead to a 'purer' scientific approach. Rather, they are factors to keep in mind as I go through my research.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### LUDOLOGY VS. NARRATOLOGY

The first question I will attempt to answer is how games can construct a procedural subjectivity. To do this, I must perform another small historiography of game studies as a field of research, this time as it pertains to the nature of storytelling in games. I'm doing this both to clearly position myself in relation to canonical and contemporary game studies research, and to elaborate on the academic foundations upon which the term procedural subjectivity is built.

Game studies, as a distinguished field of study, was established around the turn of the millennium, starting with a controversy about the applicability of literary theory to the study of games (Fernández-Vara 2014, 235). Noted game scholar Espen Aarseth famously argued for a game studies that was totally divorced from the from the fields of research from which it originated:

“Games are both object and process; they can't be read as texts or listened to as music, they must be played. Playing is integral, not coincidental like the appreciative reader or listener. [...] Yet much of the industry and the academic commentators see the need for "narrative" structures in order to understand games and make games "better.” (Aarseth 2001)

While the tone is rather polemic, there is a clear distinction being made in what is a natural venue for analysis in the medium of video games versus in other forms of media. Though it was at the time more pressing for game scholars to garner academic and cultural recognition for their field of study than it is today, this is still a somewhat prevalent sentiment (Juul 2005, 190). Many prominent game theorists conceptualize games as consisting of a mechanical, rules-based core, with a fictional world or semiotic layer tacked on top (Aarseth 2014, 488; Juul 2005, 1), some going as far as to argue that 'complex' themes, like love, ambition and social conflict are too difficult to implement in the rules, and are therefore only presented in the fictional world (Juul 2005, 189). This school of thought is broadly referred to as ludology.

In stark opposition stand the narratologists, who argue for a more traditional approach of media criticism, lifting many theoretical concepts from disciplines such as literature and film studies, while keeping an appreciation for the medium-specific formal elements of video games (Murray 1998). Much of this scholarship concerns itself with a structuralist approach to understanding narrative in games (Fernández-Vara 2014, 18) and the uniquely 'branching' plot formations that result from a fundamentally interactive medium (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2015, 205), as well as the ways stories can be told through the design of game spaces (Jenkins 2004). Fundamentally, to the narratologists, games are an expression of storytelling, wherein the formal elements of the medium constitute the types of stories that can be told and the most effective ways to tell them (Egenfeldt-

Nielsen et al. 2015, 214-218).

Springing off from this approach are the proceduralists, whose insights will be crucial for my analysis of *The Novelist*. Coalescing around Ian Bogost's influential term 'procedural rhetoric' (Bogost 2006), this group quickly gained a lot of momentum among game scholars and 'auteur'-oriented game designers (Sicart 2011). At the foundation of procedurality lies the idea that games can employ rules to effect game situations, thereby instilling the player with an interpretation of the game. Bogost writes:

"This is really what we do when we play video games: we explore the possibility space its rules afford by manipulating the symbolic systems the game provides. The rules do not merely create the experience of play – they also construct the meaning of the game."

(Bogost 2008, 121)

Three key features of the procedural rhetoric are explained here: firstly, that it is communicated to the player through experimentation with the game's systems, rather than directly. Secondly, that the rules of the game structure this process of experimentation. And thirdly, that the creation of meaning in video games is wholly reliant upon the procedural rhetoric. What this leads to is an interpretation of game design that equates authoring code to authoring a message; it is easy to see why many game designers would find it attractive.

Proceduralism borrows from ludology its concern with rules as the primary formal aspects of video games, but follows the narratologist tradition of translating games into meaning-making machines. Its persuasiveness to theorists lies in the fact that it allows them to study any game's meaning (and, potentially, even its effect on players) by analyzing only these formal elements. One of the main criticisms leveled against this approach by play theorist Miguel Sicart, however, addresses exactly that:

"For proceduralists, games have meanings that are prior to the act of playing the game, [...] and that essence is to be found in the rules. [...] This leads to an understanding of play, and leisure, as mechanical outcomes of processes [...] Its disregard for expressive or ineffective play, turns the act of playing a game into a labor-like action, into work towards an externally decided, predetermined, and rational outcome designed by others than the players. Play becomes external to the player and the play context." (Sicart 2011)

This critique reintroduces a knowledge that was central to the ludologists: that play is fundamentally unpredictable, and that the structuralist approach to uncovering meaning in games is strictly in conflict with the principle of player agency. Sicart writes: "the meaning of a game cannot be reduced to its rules, nor to the behaviors derived from the rules, since play will be a process of appropriation



of those rules, a dialogue between the system and the player” (Sicart 2011). Though this is a fair point to make, it leaves us game theorists in a bit of a pickle. Indeed, a purely structuralist approach to reading games leaves out play and the player, both integral parts to video games as a narrative medium – moreso than to other media, since the very story will literally not happen unless a player interacts with the game to set it in motion. But surely we cannot fully discount the formalist project on this basis alone? If games are a dialogue between system and player, how else shall we study the system?

### **PROCEDURAL SUBJECTIVITY**

It is here that I would like to position myself as a researcher. I will cede to the narratologists that games are fundamentally a storytelling medium. I will cede to the ludologists that play cannot be left out of the picture to gain a full understanding of a game’s functioning within any given context. But I must also cede to proceduralism that it is impossible to interact with symbolic elements without gleaning ideas or logics from it. My contention to consolidate all of these knowledges into the same framework, is that procedurality is not a rhetoric that flows from the game’s design into the player, but rather that procedurality invites the player to take up a certain subject-position from which the game gains a certain meaning. This process is what I call procedural subjectivity.

To elaborate on this idea, I must theorize in more detail what the creation of meaning entails. As cultural theorist Stuart Hall notes: “the relation between ‘things,’ concepts and signs lies at the heart of the production of meaning in language. The process which links these three elements together is what we call ‘representation’” (Hall 1997, 5). Within the context of a video game, these ‘things’ are the systems the player is able to interact with. The process which links these systems to concepts and signs, then, is procedurality, since experimentation is what leads the player to an understanding of the logic behind the mechanics. Procedurality, then, must be a form of representation, and can be analyzed as such.

Representation, in turn, is a discursive, sociopolitical practice that is situated in, shaped by, and affective upon a network of power relations which stretches beyond the reach of any singular text (Hall 1997, 28). If we can understand procedurality as a form of representation, we can understand it as an utterance within a larger cultural context; in other words, as part of a discourse. This means that designing game systems to interact in a certain way is akin to authoring a statement. Discourses, and thus procedurality, fulfill a central role in the generation of knowledge. Hall, building on critical theorist Michel Foucault, writes: “discourses themselves construct the subject-positions from which they become meaningful and have effects” (Hall 1997, 40). Discourses

are not a collection of utterances that tell us what is wrong and what is right; they instead afford us a perspective from which things seem wrong and right, a subject-position. We are simultaneously subjected to this perspective and made the subject of it. We can use these knowledges to shed more light on the inner workings of procedurality: being a form of representation, it functions as part of a discourse, creating and inviting the player into a subject-position from which meaning is created.

To summarize, I contend that games, through the design of their mechanics and interactions between mechanics, necessarily construct a subject-position from which their juxtaposition of mechanics becomes meaningful, and that they invite players into this subject-position by letting them experiment with the game systems and uncovering the logic behind those systems on their own. Crucial to this process is that players still negotiate their relation to this subject-position based on many more factors than the formal elements of the game; we are only studying one half of a dialogue here. This is the essence of how procedural subjectivity is constituted. I have hereby answered my first sub-question, and fulfilled queer game scholar Derek A. Burrill's clairvoyant statement: "...queer games studies would privilege neither narratology nor ludology as schema, but would perhaps instead configure a meta-hybrid approach that actively deconstructs the methodologies themselves" (Burrill 2017, 27).

## QUEER PERSPECTIVES

In this section, I will elaborate on the relation between queerness and subjectivity. As discussed earlier, there is a need for queer theoretical frameworks to be developed around game studies and production. To do this, I will first explore what 'queer' and 'to queer' can mean in a gaming context, before discussing how these terms apply to procedural subjectivity.

As stated before, the field of queer game studies is hard to characterize concisely. Within critical theory, the process of queering usually refers to the act of "locating unspoken norms by which a field of human activity or knowledge is operating, and finding points of rupture that destabilize those assumptions, opening up those fields to a wider and potentially more liberatory set of possibilities" (Clark 2017, 4). We can see that queering is not merely a subversive form of engagement, but in fact a re-examination of our systems of knowledge production. For instance, an analysis of the homoerotic subtext of a classic text is not just a rebellious act of reclamation; it also exposes the assumptions about heterosexuality that underpin the dominant readings of many classic texts today. The act of introducing instability to seemingly stable systems is central here (Ahmed 2006, 5). This means problematizing binaries and definitions that are taken for granted, and showing how they can be complex, contradictory, and fluid. The refusal of queer game studies to be clearly defined can be seen as part of this project (Ruberg & Shaw 2017, xii).

"Queering popular culture, then, involves critically engaging with cultural artefacts in order to explore the ways in which meaning and identity is (inter)textually (re)produced," writes queer theorist Nikki Sullivan (2003, 190). Destabilization and denaturalization in this case function to expose the inner workings of the system that is being queered. Paradoxically, this helps us better understand those systems, and changes them fundamentally. Sullivan writes:

"...queer does not function here as a label that one can appropriately (or otherwise) apply to (the essence of) a particular text. Rather than functioning as a noun, queer can be used as a verb, that is, to describe a process, a movement between viewer, text, and world, that reinscribes (or queers) each and the relations between them." (Sullivan 2003, 192)

A non-essentialist approach to culture, that posits that texts can have any number of meanings ascribed to them in a transformative process, lies at the root of this interpretation. Queering a text therefore navigates precariously between uncovering the themes lying within said text, and adding completely new ones to it. It is assumed, then, that instability is a defining characteristic of existence, and that any system can be destabilized. Indeed, the researcher herself is often subjected to this process of queering, whereby her assumptions are rendered visible, denaturalized, and then transformed in the act of queering; this certainly holds true to my experience.

Within the production of queer games, this process has taken several different forms. On the one hand, a dominant cultural framework of games as inherently liberating and pleasurable is queered by designing games with a focus on disempowerment and subjectivity (Pow 2018, 46). On the other hand, a move has been made toward the representation of the lived experiences of queer authors. Note that these approaches are by no means mutually exclusive, since the lives of queer people can often be characterized by experiences of confusion and frustration (Pow 2018, 51). While earlier game theorists might still conceptualize “the feeling of escaping failure (often by improving our skills)” as “central to the enjoyment of games” (Juul 2013, 7), these games may present players with situations that are ‘unsolvable’ or ‘unwinnable,’ queering the very notion of what it is that motivates us to play games.

Key knowledges presented here are that the act of queering, by subverting its subject’s core functions, simultaneously reveals new insights about that subject, while also transforming it into something new; it is not merely a process of deconstruction and critique, but in itself constructive. Additionally, it is deeply tied to the observing subjects themselves, either by making them part of the transformation or by exploring the subjectivities of queer people. It is therefore an invaluable term to my dual goal of gaining an understanding of the meaning-production in games and the contribution to the cultural basin of queer experiences in video games. I will now explore how queering relates to procedural subjectivity by analyzing why this concept should be queered and why it can be queered.

## **PROCEDURAL QUEERNESS**

In her seminal text “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” critical theorist Donna Haraway argues for a feminist objectivity: “I would like to insist on the embodied nature of all vision and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere” (Haraway 1988, 581). This move is clearly a queer one: to conceptualize objectivity as a radically self-reflexive subjectivity and thus render its inherent systems of domination powerless. To Haraway, the idea that we can glean objective knowledge from a ‘neutral’ perspective is as foreign as the idea that subjectivity conflicts with the attainment of objective knowledge (Haraway 1988, 584).

Fundamentally, the thing that Haraway argues against is the “god trick” (Haraway 1988, 152), the idea that knowledge can exist independently from a subject-position that creates it – either by idolizing the non-subjective or by claiming that objectivity is impossible for subjective beings, in both cases separating subjectivity and objectivity into distinct categories.

This interpretation of the production of knowledge is very much in line with procedural

subjectivity: it is from the subject-position that is created by a game's systems that the game is able to become meaningful. Yet at the same time, this subject-position threatens to obscure its own subjectivity and dominate the process of meaning-production if it is accepted uncritically, itself performing a kind of god trick. A clear example that we will encounter during my analysis is that a first-person perspective in games stresses subjectivity by tethering the spatial perception of the player to that of the main character, but at the same time makes itself transparent by taking focus away from the player's embodiment in a character and towards a disembodied vision as the arbiter of reality. The value of queering games, then, lies in its ability to make players aware of this god trick as a way to fight its influence and reframe their experiences in the game as situated knowledges.

Another site for queer intervention lies in the performative aspect of play. In the groundbreaking *Gender Trouble*, queer theorist Judith Butler frames the performance of gender as a bit of a game itself: "the tacit agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them" (Butler 1990, 179). To Butler, gender is famously not an *a priori* truth, but rather a socially constructed institution that is held in place by a network of performativity. "For Butler," Nikki Sullivan argues, "the term performativity refers to a precondition of subjectivity, it is that which constitutes subjectivity in and through relations with others and with a world" (Sullivan 2003, 196). This interpretation crystallizes the usefulness of Butler's theory for our conceptualization of procedural subjectivity: this subjectivity is not simply crafted into reality by the rules systems of a game, but rather made possible by performativity. Inhabiting the constructed subject-position requires itself a sort of tacit agreement to perform, produce, and sustain the purported truths the position constructs, and is enforced through the threat of punishment, in this case by the game's rules, rather than society; e.g. refusing to accept entities in a game as enemies that must be confronted can lead to fail states or missing out on points that can be scored. Procedurality forms the framework within which performance is elicited from the player, but performativity is also a prerequisite for the procedural subjectivity to function.

This sheds new light on what Miguel Sicart defines as "instrumental play" (Sicart 2011), the mechanical fulfillment of tasks that is expected of players by a procedural rhetoric. Though Sicart frames this concept as antithetical to the essence of play and player agency, I re-contextualize this instrumentality as an opportunity for queering: if a player is expected (or, as I frame it, invited) to enact a specific performance to constitute a predesigned subjectivity, she necessarily has the ability to deviate from these expectations and thereby construct her own subjectivity within the game. Performativity is not a denial of player freedom, it is a channel for it. In this interpretation, procedural subjectivity dictates a negotiation between player and game, which shifts the focus the

game's formal elements as a system of domination to the player's own embodiment and values, constantly being affected by and affective upon the game's procedural subjectivity. The possibility of queering games, then, lies in this relation between player and game through performativity.

Having theorized why procedural subjectivity can and should be queered, I will wrap up by writing about *how* it can be queered, specifically from within its own design. To do this, it is important to convey that video games are fundamentally a spatial medium (Jenkins 2004). Overwhelmingly, their stories as they are played out concern navigation through an environment and interaction with it. When talking about structure in a game, we are talking about the design of levels, the ordering of space to produce a chrononormative hierarchy in the narrative elements embedded within that space. This is a trait that games share with queerness. As queer theorist Sara Ahmed notes: "queer is [...] a spatial term [...] for a twisted sexuality that does not follow a 'straight line,' a sexuality that is bent and crooked" (Ahmed 2006, 67). Crucially, sexuality is likened here to movement, an activity that is absolutely fundamental to video games. Ahmed theorizes this movement by reconsidering the 'orientation' in 'sexual orientation,' suggesting that "orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well as "who" or "what" we direct our energy and attention toward" (Ahmed 2006, 3). The relation to procedural subjectivity here becomes visible: if sexuality is movement, then games can invite certain kinds of movement, which then shapes how we make sense of the world within those games. The crux for constituting a queer procedural subjectivity thus lies in working around orientations that move in a straight line.

## METHOD

I have now answered my first two sub-questions: how procedural subjectivity is constructed and how it can be queered. I will now apply these knowledges in a formal textual analysis of two core mechanical aspects of *The Novelist*, the movement and the stealth system. First, though, I must establish what this method entails precisely. Clara Fernández-Vara writes:

“Textual analysis is the in-depth study of a text [...], using the text as a sample or case study to understand a specific issue or topic. By using inductive reasoning and analyzing specific texts, we can develop general theories that can be applied to other works.” (Fernández-Vara 2014, 9)

This means two things. Firstly, that I will be studying the construction of meaning within the game (ibidem, 6) by interacting with it myself, making sense of its responses to my interactions, and thus engaging in a sort of dialogue with it (ibidem, 8). Secondly, it means that both my goal and approach is to apply theories to the case study as a way of uncovering new information about it (ibidem, 235). For game studies specifically this is a productive mode of engagement, since the field is still in the process of developing frameworks to understand the core functions of its subject of study (ibidem, 234). This method is appropriate for my research, since I am interested in applying procedural subjectivity and queerness as theoretical frameworks to investigate my case study, with the partial goal of contributing to the development of these frameworks for further use within this field of research. Textual analysis will allow me to test if these theories yield productive knowledges when applied to video games. Fernández-Vara urges young researchers to focus on using pre-developed theories (ibidem, 234), but since I am writing this thesis within the Humanities Honours Programme, I am afforded the additional space and challenge to focus on my own theory of procedural subjectivity – fulfilling both the learning goals of breadth, by bridging game studies and gender studies, and that of depth, by engaging with the greater challenge of formulating my own theory.

My analysis is not only textual, however, but also formal. Game scholars Petri Lankoski and Staffan Björk explain:

“Formal analysis is the name for research where an artifact and its specific elements are examined closely, and the relations of the elements are described in detail. [...] Formal analysis of gameplay in games takes a basis in studying a game independent of context, that is, without regarding which specific people are playing a specific instance of the game. [...] In practice, formal analysis of games depends on playing a game and forming an understanding how the game system works.” (Lankoski & Björk 2015, 23)

The important part in this approach is its focus on the formal elements of the case study, rather than on the game as it is played by specific demographics. The formal elements of video games are things such as components, actions, and goals (Lankoski & Bjork 2015, 25-27). These elements have a structuralist foundation as a conceptual tool to discuss the medium. I find this approach appropriate for video games, since they are themselves often structured systems of rules in a computer program (Fernández-Vara 2014, 18). This tactic brings with it a major advantage: that my investigation of the game's rules, and thus its construction of procedural subjectivity, can take center stage in the analysis. This will give me ample opportunity to showcase my theories and tie the case study into a larger context. There is also a major challenge, however, in analyzing a game without analyzing its player(s), owing to the highly interactive nature of the medium. I must contend with the accountability of my own play (see page 6) as I endeavor to make claims about an integral part of the game to which I only have access through that play; I must find out what the rules of the game are by experimenting with the systems they afford, just like any other player.

Ultimately, I have chosen this methodological approach to highlight the side of the player-game dialogue that I am most interested in developing: the potential for intervention in the design and structuring of games. A formal textual analysis helps me bring those aspects to the forefront. In my analysis of *The Novelist*, I will use this method to investigate the two aspects of gameplay that I find most compelling. I have chosen these aspects because I think they exemplify the two different ways in which the gameplay of *The Novelist* is queered, and, when put together, this leads to an interesting tension between them. I will elaborate on this in the following sections, but it is useful to note that there are many other aspects of gameplay that can be analyzed productively along the lines that I follow throughout this thesis. I contend that the movement and stealth mechanics offer enough research material for this investigation, so I will focus on them.



## ANALYSIS

In this section, I will answer my third and fourth sub-questions: how is movement in *The Novelist* queer; and how are the stealth mechanics in *The Novelist* queer? First, however, I will give an overview of the game's general story and mechanics.

In *The Novelist*, players move through a vacation home in which a family of three resides (writer Dan Kaplan, painter Linda Kaplan, and their eight-year-old son Tommy Kaplan). Players gather clues to discover the needs and desires of each family member, while avoiding being seen by them. Afterwards, players choose one family member's wish to grant, and a second member to offer a less ideal version of their demand. They then whisper their choices into the ear of the sleeping Dan Kaplan, and he is implied to unwittingly follow the player's command, as the player's choices are highlighted in a short cutscene consisting of a still image and some text for each character. The entire process then starts again from the beginning, with different clues in different locations and various environmental changes throughout the house. Players repeat this cycle numerous times, before the game ends with a longer cutscene summarizing the effects of the family's stay in the house. The story is concerned with the management of resources such as time and energy, and family life is presented as a series of compromises amongst its members. The player's avatar (the character they inhabit as they play the game) is implied to be a non-corporeal entity in the house, which has existed there for several decades, using its abilities of suggestion to influence the lives of everyone who has spent time in the house. Players are left wondering if the titular 'Novelist' refers to the character of Dan Kaplan, or to themselves.

It is useful to note that the story makes little if any effort to veer away from patriarchal, heterosexual stereotypes. For example, Dan Kaplan seems to be the only character directly affecting family life, and though his agency is brought into question, it is never remarked upon as strange that the player never whispers their choices in the ear of someone else. Additionally, Dan's career as a writer is portrayed as a financial necessity for the family, while Linda's career as a painter is never treated in the same way, coming across more as a luxury activity for her spare time. Though these elements of the story are not the point of this thesis, it is important to keep in mind during the following analysis that the instances of queering that take place in *The Novelist* are most likely not there on purpose. As far as I can tell, neither sole author Kent Hudson nor anyone responding to the game has remarked upon the queer elements in it. This highlights a characteristic of procedurality, namely its difference from authorial intent. Though game designers often consider themselves the ultimate arbiter of the game as an end product (Sicart 2011), procedurality is an effect of the rules and symbolic elements in a game, not of its explicit design (Bogost 2008, 123). I will now examine player movement in *The Novelist* in more detail.

## EMBODIED MOVEMENT

To understand how movement is queered in *The Novelist*, we must first understand how stasis is made straight. Partially, this straightness is a metaphor, though it also refers to Sara Ahmed's understanding of sexual orientation as a form of movement (Ahmed 2006, 67). Just as a game can be queered if players deviate from the straight path, it can be straight if they don't. In this case, we are not looking at player's interactions (Lankoski & Björk 2015, 23), but instead at the position they are invited into; does *it* stray from the straight path?

As soon as the player clicks through the opening menu and starts the game proper, she is greeted by a three-dimensional representation of a living room:



Figure 1: The opening level of *The Novelist*

If the player moves the mouse, she soon discovers that it controls the camera, and this game is played from a first-person perspective. I want to take this opportunity to explore the significance of this fact in some detail. Since players are tasked with navigating a three-dimensional space, not all information is directly available to them as they enter an area. A clue might be obscured by a wall or an object, and the player has to move around in order to reveal it. This shifts the focus of discovering clues from the player looking around on the screen, as we might see in a 'spot the differences' puzzle, to the player moving her avatar's (the player's representation within the game world) field of view around the area, her eyes being presumed to be mostly aimed at the center of the screen. Players are not made explicitly aware of this relation, but are expected to naturally discover it as

they experiment with the camera system. As they move their field of view to gain an understanding of the three-dimensional environment around their avatar, they familiarize themselves with this mode of orientation. Establishing this relation is important, since it creates a metaphorical link between the player moving her mouse and the player's avatar moving their (presumed) head. This is the defining aspect of procedurality: a narrative element being established as the 'logical' result of experimentation with the game's systems (Bogost 2008, 121). Of course, it would have been entirely possible for the camera to function in a different way; for instance, players cannot rotate the camera more than 90 degrees up or down, since it would result in the game's world being presented 'upside down.' It would not make sense within the fiction of the game for a character to walk around with their head flipped or rotated to one side, so these options are not enabled. Instead, we are presented with a schema for camera movement that's meant to end up feeling 'natural.'

This naturalization is the point where the player is invited to take up a subject-position from which the entire process becomes meaningful. If we understand our character to be a person within this environment, it is only natural that they would perceive the world this way, and if we perceive the world this way, it is only natural to conclude that our character must be a person within this environment. This is what Hall means when he writes that "discourses themselves construct the subject-positions from which they become meaningful and have effects" (Hall 1997, 40). Flowing outward from this point, it is meant to become natural to contextualize the game's architecture as meaningful, not merely as obstacles that block line of sight or as mathematical functions in the code of the game, but as walls that hold up a house, or a dinner table at an appropriate height. In short, it becomes an actual environment, rather than a series of ones and zeroes in a computer program or colored blotches on a screen. A 'god trick' as described by Haraway has happened here: the capacity of vision has been naturalized into a gaze with direct access to objective reality (Haraway 1988, 152), while in fact the player is being tricked into forgetting that it was the game that constructed this subject-position for her. This is a procedural subjectivity, a subject-position as constructed by the game's mechanical systems.

Diligent readers, however, will have noticed that there is something off about the above picture. The player's point of view is angled suspiciously high, and straight lines seem to bend away from the center of the screen. Indeed, the player will find as she angles the camera downward, that she is suspended above the living room, looking through a lens with a fisheye-like effect. As soon as she presses a movement key, her avatar moves softly down to the ground and assumes a more traditional first-person perspective. In this game, the player can enter lamps in the game world, and look from within them as though through a CCTV camera. A side-by-side comparison:



*Figure 2: The living room from a standing lamp.*



*Figure 3: The living room while standing in front of the lamp.*

As we can see, compared to Figure 3, Figure 2 has a slightly muted color palette, an increased Field of View (causing the fisheye lens effect), a slightly elevated height, and darkened corners on the edge of the screen. This is the screen effect when looking from inside a lamp. While looking directly at a lamp from any distance, a white border becomes visible around it, and the text “Space: Possess” appears in the bottom of the screen. If the player presses the spacebar, she is propelled forward into the perspective of the lamp. Players can also jump from lamp to lamp by pressing spacebar while looking at another lamp.



Figure 4: The living room from behind the lamp.

Moving in and out of lamps is the central way of exploring the house, and is the point where movement in *The Novelist* starts becoming very queer indeed. As players experiment with this ability, they are inevitably confronted by the question of their avatar’s corporeality. It is commonplace for first-person games to not show a character model when the player looks down, but the ability to move into objects that are generally not accessible for humans in this way, recontextualizes the lack of the player’s reflection in the windows, and the lack of feet below them. Does the avatar’s body change as they shift into the lamp? Does the avatar even have a body to speak of? Suddenly, the player’s vision is embodied, through this apparent lack of embodiment, reversing the god trick (Haraway 1988, 581). The stability of the first-person perspective as a neutral way to view the world is denaturalized, revealing the presence of the body through its absence.

It is not just the camera that is queered through this mechanic, however. Since the player

can move into a lamp from very far away, and jumping into a lamp is a rather fast process, the game's environment can be navigated quite efficiently by rapidly jumping between lamps. This recontextualizes everything in the environment, from walls and objects that block line of sight to the next lamp, to the respective lamps that each lamp can see from its fixed position. Unlike hallways or stairs, which can generally be approached in one of two directions, the lamps become nodes in a complex network that spans the entire game area, opening up many different paths for the player to connect. What's most incredible about this system of movement, is that, with all the seamless possibilities for lamp-hopping, the player never loses the ability to step out the lamps and move 'on foot.' This system allows players to weave together intricate patterns of walking and jumping across the environment and, in doing so, move beyond dichotomies of corporeality or architectural connectivity. As players explore the house looking for clues – which, let's not forget, is the stated goal of the game – they settle into this queered pattern of mobility, reminiscent of the 'flâneur,' a wandering dandy that has been historically approached as queer or feminized (Kagen 2018). The ability to at any time switch between lamphopping and 'physical' exploration gives a pleasant feeling of looking outward in a somewhat detached state, while also enjoying the walk itself as an embodied experience.

To return to my theory of procedural subjectivity: what has happened here is that *The Novelist* has moved from a destabilization of the camera system to a full recontextualization of the movement system, inviting the player to constantly rethink her embodiment, her vision, and her ability to relate to the environment through movement. But most importantly, *The Novelist* has put the player in charge of this process. The game's affordances turn the "tacit agreement to perform" this role into inviting possibilities that let the player express herself through performativity (Butler 1990, 179). It is the player who makes sense of these networks of lamps and hallways, who decides how to relate to floors and walls at what time, to orient herself within a world that offers many different possibilities (Ahmed 2006, 3); in other words, the procedural subjectivity is queered, inviting the player into a subject-position from which there are many more than just straight paths to follow.

## SAFETY AND VISIBILITY

Having answered the question of how movement in *The Novelist* is queer, I will now explore the stealth mechanics and their relation to queerness. Though the last section focused on the possibilities afforded by queering a restrictive framework of thought, namely how movement and embodiment are 'supposed to' work, this section will delve into the precarious situations that queer people have to deal with in the real world. If you are uncomfortable with discussions of LGBTQ+ violence, please move on to the next section.

As the player moves around the house, so do the three Kaplans. They each follow semi-randomized paths through the house, going back and forth between a few places they are programmed to loiter around in; Dan might stare melancholically out the window, be working at his typewriter, or read on the couch or at the table, while Linda and Tommy each have their own routines. The Kaplans don't move particularly fast and are not very perceptive, yet their movements are erratic and their presence is felt constantly throughout the game: the sound of their footsteps on the stairs, their greetings as they pass one another in the hall, the things they mutter to themselves when they think no one is listening. They don't seem to interact very much or very deeply, rather living somewhat past each other in the same house. Together with the music, which consists mostly of high, infrequent piano notes in a minor key, creates an eerie soundscape that is simultaneously very busy and deeply lonely. These sounds remind the player that the Kaplans are there, and if she is not careful, they will find her. They are not actually programmed to be very efficient at this task, but the point is that their presence is always known and always feels close.

The main tool the player has to avoid detection are the lamps. While inside a lamp, the player is completely undetectable to the Kaplans, and even jumping between lamps will not alert them. While this might seem like it would deflate most of the tension, the opposite is actually true: since the player cannot pick up clues from inside a lamp, and not all spots in the house can be seen from a lamp, she will eventually be forced the step outside on her own accord. The relative slowness of this way of movement is now only exacerbated with the constant pressure of being watched in the back of the player's mind. Another factor that greatly contributes to this tension is the fact that movement, gathering clues and jumping to safety all require the player to look towards the thing they are interacting with, meaning they cannot at the same time keep an eye on the Kaplans or a lamp to use as an escape route. All of this changes the empowering movement mechanics into an uncomfortable situation, where safely watching the Kaplans from a lamp does not feel powerful, but cowardly, and where you are constantly trying to keep track of the wandering family-members.



Figure 5: Hiding from Dan Kaplan in the kitchen.

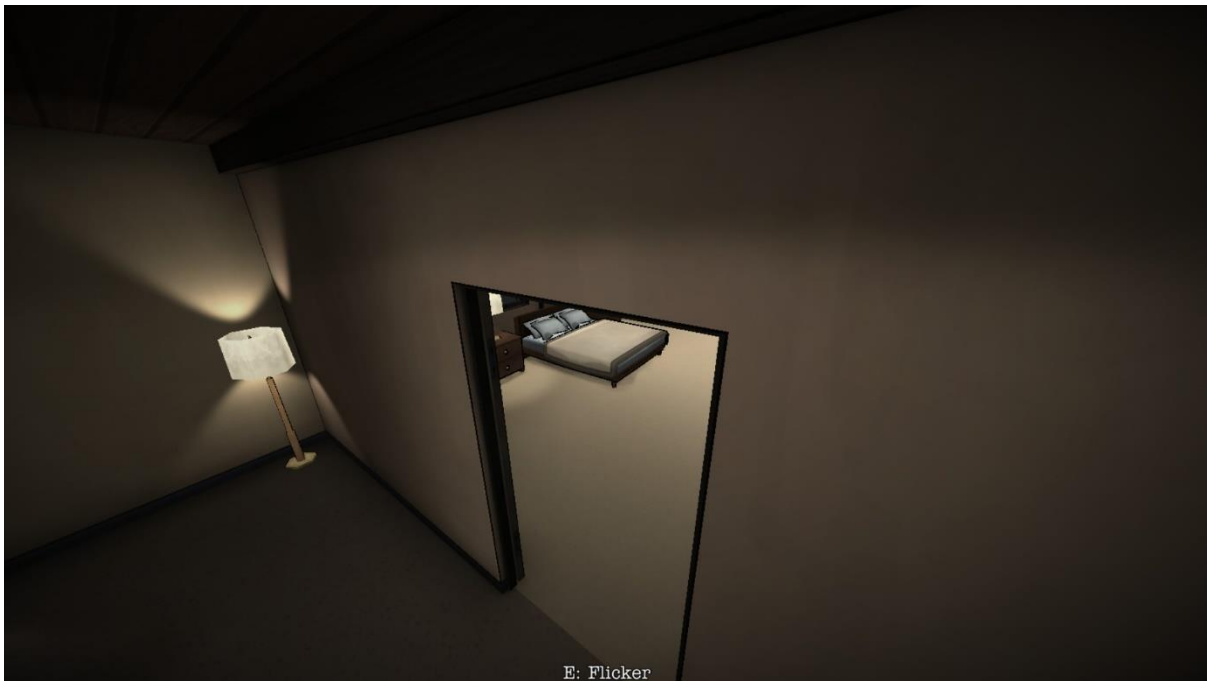


Figure 6: Trying to check the bedroom from a lamp.



This type of design is meant to disempower the player, constantly confronting her with the things she cannot do: walk around freely, be acknowledged by others, go outside. Game theorist Whitney Pow describes a school of queer game design that uses similar techniques:

“In many queer games, choices are few, failure is unavoidable, and the experience of being unable to fully "overcome" or "win" against the game system is a part of the way the game is designed. This experience of complete lack of control over space, choices and actions is highlighted in queer games [...] to mimic the ways in which structural inequalities function against queer subjects, re-creating institutional and structural logics that queer subjects cannot escape and are always designed to fail.” (Pow 2018, 47)

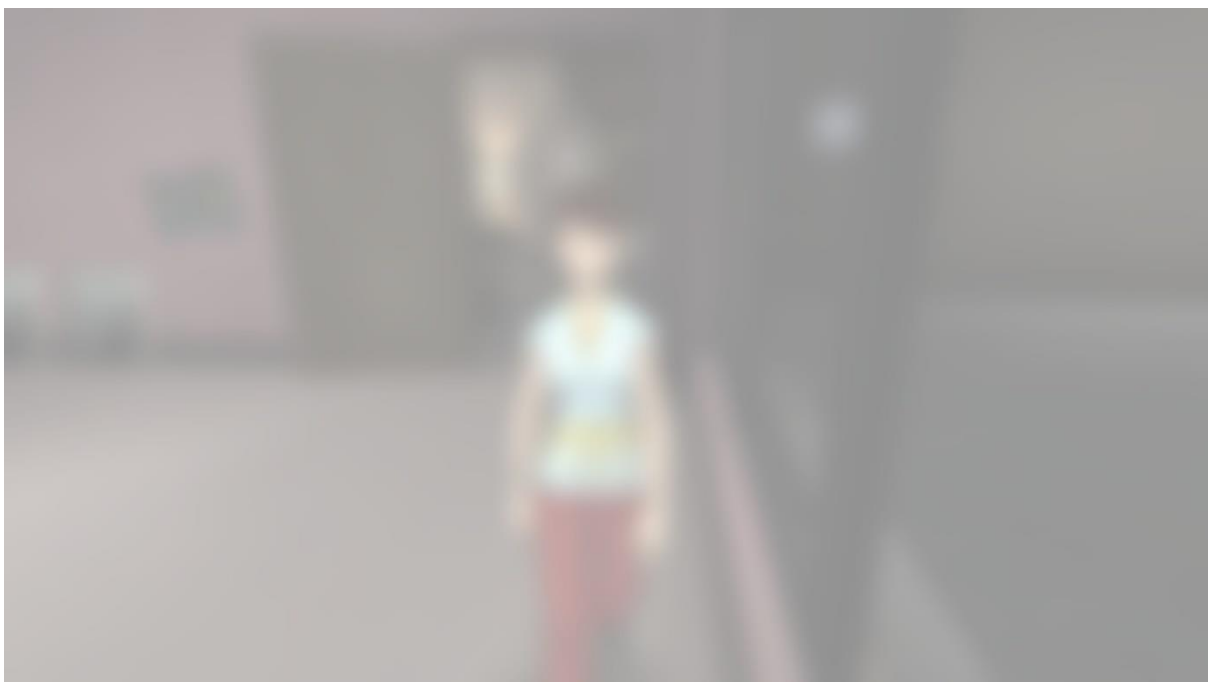
This lack of control is exemplified in *The Novelist* by what happens when the player gets caught by a Kaplan. As long as the Kaplan is watching the player, her vision will start to become more and more blurred, until finally whiting out completely, playing a loud sound, and administering a narrative punishment. The narrative result is not severe, and the sounds Linda and Tommy make are not that startling, though Dan’s audio mastering is a little off, leaving players with a legitimately frightening moment if they don’t know what’s coming. However, there is still punishment for failing to perform the appropriate role, as with Butler’s theory of gender (Butler 1990, 179). It occurs in the blurring effect, which takes away the player’s primary tool for orienting herself, meaning the player can no longer make sense of her environment or make use of her movement options (Ahmed 2006, 3). The experience is deeply uncomfortable and transforms the house into a foreign and inaccessible location.

For it is important to note that the house is meant to feel like the player’s home. As the player goes through multiple cycles, seeing the house change with time, mastering the paths across it, she can develop a sense of ownership. Conversely, the fact that she is never able to leave, means that she is confined to this house, forcibly making it her home. She is tethered to it, though the Kaplans are not (see Figure 9). In fact, the Kaplans are the ones who get to open and shut doors, turn of lights (greatly restricting the player’s movement) or decorate the house with their belongings. Though we don’t see the Kaplans do these things directly, the implication is clear: external forces control this house, and you are not welcome. You are not safe. Only when it is dark may you come out without fear (Figure 10), when there is no color to greet you. You get to observe the Kaplans, but they are immune to your stares, and if they see you...

At this point I want to stress that the game is attempting to convey all of these thoughts and feelings to the player through procedural subjectivity. The riskiness of all the player’s actions, the loss of control when caught, these systems work to invite the player into the subject-position of someone who is fundamentally not ‘at home,’ yet also cannot leave. What makes this subject-position queer is the metaphorical link between this experience and the experiences of LGBTQ+



*Figure 7: Linda Kaplan sees the player.*



*Figure 8: Linda Kaplan has caught the player.*



Figure 9: A memory of Tommy Kaplan as seen from inside the house.



Figure 10: The house at night.

people in abusive and dangerous situations. Whitney Pow, studying a different game with a similar procedural subjectivity, writes:

“The game itself calls attention to the queer entwinement of domestic violence and familial estrangement as LGBTQ issues, highlighting the experience of living in a home that is not safe and feeling the constant threat of precarity, violence, and expulsion looming overhead.”  
(Pow 2018, 47)

Portraying the home space as something that is “oppressively alienating and unsafe” connects the “embodied experience of alienation, discomfort, and unsafety within virtual worlds to the lived experience of queer individuals” (Pow 2018, 43-44). By placing focus on how external forces pressure the player’s body inward, the vision is returned to the body and the god trick denied (Haraway 1988, 152). At the same time, orientation is not allowed to develop freely, leaving the player lost in her sense of direction, forcing her to make movement decisions not based on desire, but on fear and self-preservation (Ahmed 2006, 3). It is clear that this is a queer subjectivity, though in a very different way than what we saw in the last section. This time, not the process of looking and moving is destabilized, but the principles of agency and empowerment, themselves dominant frameworks in the games industry (Pow 2018, 45). This procedural subjectivity invites the player into a subject-position that is metaphorically tied to the lived experiences of queer people.

## CONCLUSION

At this point, I want to summarize the sub-questions I have answered so far. First, I described the construction of a procedural subjectivity as the process whereby the mechanical composition of a game invites the player into a subject-position from which the game becomes meaningful. Then, I argued that procedural subjectivity can be queered by working around orientations that move in a straight line. Then, I showed how the ability to move through lamps generated a queer procedural subjectivity by offering many non-straight paths to follow. Lastly, I demonstrated how the ever-present pressure of remaining hidden generated a procedural subjectivity that metaphorically tied the player's orientation to the experiences of queer people. I will now discuss my final sub-question: how do the movement and stealth mechanics relate to each other?

As we have seen, both mechanical systems are queered through procedural subjectivity, one by presenting a subject-position that afforded lots of possibilities, and one by presenting a subject-position that was analogous to an embodied experience. In both cases, there was a recontextualization of the vision within a body, and both cases had strong ties to the concept of performativity. The two examples are antithetical to each other, one representing queer liberation, and one the precarity of being queer in unsafe spaces. Yet they exist simultaneously within *The Novelist*, and one does not cancel the other out. It feels good to zoom around between lamps and forge my own path through the house, more so when being inside the lamps feels so relatively safe and liberating. At the same time, the Kaplans' presence is overwhelming, more so when the lamps become prisons that the player cannot safely step out of. I must admit at this point that I am unable to answer the question I posed myself, and therein might lie the answer: there is no 'straight line' that I can follow to a logical conclusion here. The juxtaposition of these mechanics queers the very concept of a queered procedural subjectivity, destabilizing the idea that a subjectivity can only inhabit one of these perspectives at a time.

And so I arrive at the answer to my research question: how does *The Novelist* establish the possibility of a queer procedural subjectivity? *The Novelist* not only shows that procedural subjectivity is a productive framework to uncover the ways in which the game's mechanics are queered, but the game's simultaneous use of seemingly contradictory conceptualizations of queerness exposes the potential that queer procedural subjectivities hold for a multifaceted exploration of orientations that do not follow a straight line.

In the future, I hope that queer game studies continues to develop its methodological sensibilities to accommodate for theories and cases that refuse to be consistent, defined, or decided.

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