Standing With as Allyship: A Reflexive Approach to Queer Game Design

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EN **Abstract.** A considerable body of queer-themed and allyship-oriented games has been discussed under the label of "empathy games," which invite players to temporarily inhabit queer experiences. While often well-intentioned, such approaches risk falling into what Ruberg (2019) terms empathy tourism, where complex forms of queer life are compressed into consumable emotions and moral reassurance. This article instead examines allyship as a design positionality grounded in witnessing, hesitation, and partial recognition rather than mastery. The study employs a critical literature review alongside a social semiotic analysis of Anna Anthropy's *Dys4ia* (2012). This methodological combination makes it possible to explore how game mechanics and player positioning operate as meaning-making strategies, and how these strategies challenge conventional empathy-driven frameworks. The results of the case study show that *Dys4ia* resists normative design expectations by proceduralising frustration, repetition, and disorientation. Fragmented micro-games, banal clinical routines, hostile interactions, and the absence of narrative closure position the player not as an inhabitant of queer embodiment but as a constrained witness. Rather than offering identification or emotional substitution, the game foregrounds ambiguity and limited understanding, thereby modelling an alternative allyship that respects difference. The article concludes that a reflexive allyship perspective contributes both conceptually and methodologically to queer game studies. By shifting attention from empathy to witnessing and partiality, this framework highlights possibilities for ethical game design that resist closure, avoid appropriation, and cultivate solidarity without collapsing experiential boundaries.
Keywords. queer video games; allyship; empathy games; witnessing; social semiotics.

ES Apoyar como forma de alianza: un enfoque reflexivo del diseño de videojuegos queer

ES **Resumen.** Un corpus considerable de videojuegos con temática queer u orientados a aliades queer ha sido analizado bajo la etiqueta de "juegos de empatía": aquellos que invitan a las personas jugadoras a habitar temporalmente experiencias queer. Aunque a menudo bien intencionados, estos enfoques corren el riesgo de caer en lo que Ruberg (2019) denomina "turismo de la empatía", donde formas complejas de la vida queer se reducen a emociones consumibles y a una reafirmación moral. Este artículo propone, en cambio, examinar los juegos centrados en aliades queer como una posición de diseño basada en el acto de testimoniar, la vacilación y el reconocimiento parcial, más que en el dominio. El estudio combina una revisión crítica de la literatura con un análisis socio-semiótico de *Dys4ia* (2012), de Anna Anthropy. Este enfoque permite explorar cómo las mecánicas y la posición de la persona jugadora actúan como estrategias de producción de sentido que cuestionan los modelos centrados en la empatía. Los resultados muestran que *Dys4ia* resiste expectativas de diseño normativas al proceduralizar la frustración, la repetición y la desorientación. Los microjuegos fragmentados, las rutinas clínicas banales y la ausencia de cierre narrativo sitúan a la persona jugadora como testigo limitado, más que como sustituto de una corporalidad queer. El juego enfatiza la ambigüedad y la comprensión parcial, proponiendo una forma de acompañamiento que respeta la diferencia. El artículo concluye que una perspectiva reflexiva del acompañamiento queer aporta contribuciones conceptuales y metodológicas a los estudios de videojuegos queer, señalando posibilidades para un diseño ético que fomente la solidaridad sin borrar distancias experienciales.
Palabras clave. videojuegos queer; alianzas; juegos de empatía; testimoniar; semiótica social.

Discussion. 4.1. Theoretical Implications of Dys4ia. 4.2. Implications for Allyship Game Design. 4.3. Future Directions for Allyship Game Design. 5. Conclusion. 6. References.

1. Introduction

Queer Game Studies has emerged over the past decade as a vibrant field at the intersection of Game Studies and Queer Theory. Scholars trace its rise to the mid-2010s, citing 2013 as a turning point when new conferences (e.g. the Queerness and Games Conference) and foundational publications by Ruberg, Shaw and others (Shaw, 2014; Ruberg & Shaw, 2017; Ruberg & Phillips, 2018) signalled a "paradigm" shift toward queer perspectives in games. The edited collection *Queer Game Studies* (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017) in particular formally established this scholarly community, moving beyond earlier research that focused primarily on LGBTQ representation in games (Shaw, 2014). Instead of treating queerness only as a subject matter (characters, narratives, players), Queer Game Studies approaches games through the framework of queerness, interrogating game design, play, and culture using Queer Theory's critiques of norms and power, such as Ahmed's account of how heteronormativity orients bodies along "straight" lines (2006) and Halberstam's exploration of failure as resistance to dominant success narratives (2011). This approach has opened new avenues of inquiry into how games can challenge heteronormative assumptions and foster inclusivity. Recent contributions range from histories of LGBTQ game makers (Ruberg, 2020) to close analyses arguing that video games "have always been queer" in their possibilities for non-normative play (Ruberg, 2019). Together, such works demonstrate the current state of queer game studies as both a critical lens and a call to resist normative structures in gaming (Ruberg & Phillips, 2018).

One key topic in both industry and academia has been the design of "empathy games." These are games created to encourage players to understand and feel for marginalised experiences, often by placing the player in the role of a queer or otherwise oppressed character. Designers have even described games as potential "empathy machines" capable of teaching players to see the world through someone else's eyes. Celebrated indie titles like *Dys4ia* (Anthropy, 2012) or *Coming Out Simulator* (Case, 2014) have sometimes been discussed in these terms, praised for fostering empathy among straight or cisgender players. However, scholars have increasingly critiqued this empathy-driven paradigm. Ruberg (2020), for example, argues that the current "rhetoric of empathy" in games is problematic and calls for "an end to [its] oft-repeated" valorisation (p. 62). Empathy games, they suggest, too often simplify complex identities into digestible experiences for a presumed straight or cisgender audience. This can lapse into "empathy tourism," wherein privileged players briefly "try on" marginalised lives like costumes or visits to an exhibit. Instead of engendering genuine understanding or solidarity, the empathy game may offer only the illusion of allyship, which can produce a self-satisfied feeling of care that allows privileged players to engage without taking any real risk or lasting responsibility (Ruberg, 2020, p. 55). In short, as Ruberg (2019) observes, playing at being queer can become a form of consumption rather than a catalyst for social change. The well-intentioned goal of empathy thus carries the risk of what Nakamura (2002) termed identity tourism, appropriating others' experiences for momentary insight while leaving underlying power structures untouched.

Given these critiques, there remains a notable gap in both design practice and scholarship: few studies consider how games might foster allyship as a distinct, reflexive mode of engagement alongside, rather than instead of, existing approaches. Much queer game design discourse has centered either on improving representation, as in work examining how queer identities are portrayed and expanded within game cultures (Shaw, 2014; Ruberg & Phillips, 2018), or on enabling empathy-driven role-play that invites players to imaginatively inhabit marginalized experiences (Ruberg, 2020; Pozo, 2018). Missing is sustained attention to the positionality of the ally, a player who does not assume a queer identity in the game but instead "stands with" queer characters as a supportive witness. Here, allyship is framed as a design stance rather than a checklist, a witness-based mode of play that invites players to reflect on their own position and limits rather than imaginatively becoming someone they are not. Rather than offering a cure for empathy tourism, this article examines how such an orientation might resist its most problematic tendencies by emphasising solidarity over simulation. In other words, designing for "standing with" foregrounds games in which the player's role is to observe, assist, and learn alongside queer protagonists while acknowledging the boundaries of their understanding. This reflexive stance has been largely overlooked in existing game studies literature, and attending to it can extend current debates in queer game design theory.

The following sections each take up a different stage of the inquiry. The methods section outlines the research design, detailing the combination of literature review and case study analysis that informs the study. The results then present the core findings, a close reading of *Dys4ia* through an allyship lens. Although *Dys4ia* is frequently described in public discourse as an empathy game or an educational resource, this interpretation contrasts with Anna Anthropy's own account of the work as a personal narrative of transition rather than a tool for teaching others what being trans feels like (D'Anastaspozoio, 2016). In this study, *Dys4ia* is therefore not positioned as a model allyship game or reframed prescriptively. The analysis instead considers how the game's queer formal qualities, including fragmentation, ambiguity, affective hesitation and its refusal of neat resolution, can inform ways of thinking about allyship-oriented design without appropriating margin-

alised experience. The allyship lens expands interpretive possibilities by foregrounding partial understanding and by emphasising standing with, rather than becoming, the other.

2. Methods

This section details the methodological approach, combining a systematic literature review with a social semiotic case study of *Dys4ia*, to examine how reflective game design can embody narrative ambiguity, deferred understanding, and the refusal of resolution as aspects of queer temporality from a reflexive ally perspective.

2.1. Literature Review

The literature review functions here as a methodological tool rather than a purely contextual survey. A systematic, analytical review can itself constitute a form of research, mapping conceptual fields, identifying gaps and informing design practice (Snyder, 2019, p.33; Boote & Beile, 2005, p.3). In this study, the review brings together work on queer temporality, design ethics and narrative ambiguity to clarify how ambiguity, partial understanding and open-endedness operate as design strategies. It also situates the researcher's position as a reflexive ally, foregrounding witnessing and partiality rather than representational authority (Haraway, 1988).

Building on this foundation, the following subsections move from critiques of empathy games and the value of an ally or witness stance, to queer game design methodologies that challenge normative play, and finally to phenomenological and affective frameworks that illuminate embodiment and disorientation in game experiences. Together, they establish the ethical and theoretical ground for analysing Dys4ia and conceptualising allyship-oriented design.

2.1.1. Witness Standpoint and Allyship in Game Design

Recent queer game studies have critically examined the so-called "empathy game" that invites players to "step into" the lives of marginalised individuals (Ruberg, 2020, p.55). While often well-intentioned, this approach risks reducing complex identities into consumable experiences for privileged audiences (p.64). Anna Anthropy, for example, strongly resisted such framing for her game *Dys4ia*, which recounts her experience with gender dysphoria. In an interview (D'Anastasio, 2015), she emphasised that no short gameplay segment could truly replicate or teach what it feels like to be a trans woman. Rather than offering authentic understanding, these games often produce what Ruberg (2019, p.179) terms "empathy tourism," wherein players briefly adopt another's perspective without engaging with the systemic realities or ongoing struggles behind that experience (p.180). In these cases, empathy becomes less an act of solidarity and more a self-congratulatory exercise that recentres the privileged player's feelings (Pozo, 2018).

In response to these critiques, scholars have suggested moving towards frameworks centred on solidarity, co-presence, and what Haraway (2008) describes as "becoming-with." This approach does not deny emotional engagement but reframes it: the goal is to validate and support, rather than to absorb and consume. A practical demonstration of a witness-based stance appears in *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2013), where players reconstruct Sam's queer coming-of-age indirectly through found objects. Rather than inhabiting her perspective, players accompany the story through Katie, whose role is to listen and piece together traces without substituting for Sam's experience (Pavlounis, 2016). This maintains distance while sustaining proximity, modelling allyship as supportive witnessing rather than identification. It also illustrates how non-queer player characters can prevent empathy tourism by refusing the fantasy of becoming the marginalised subject (Nakamura, 2002).

Extending beyond narrative framing, the concept of "designing as an ally" highlights the importance of positionality and reflective practice in game development itself. Baird and Harrer's (2021) study of their game *Allied Forces* exemplifies this. Baird and Harrer's *Allied Forces* was introduced in a *Foundations of Digital Games* conference (FDG '21) as a conceptual prototype rather than a released game, but its design remains instructive for thinking about allyship in games. *Allied Forces* (Baird & Harrer, 2021) employs a standpoint-based, reflective process that foregrounds trans voices and critically engages players with the power dynamics of allyship. The game mechanics shift across its stages —from helping a trans character face harassment and intervening in hostile environments, to supporting their self-expression— but ultimately, the logic of the game centres on the player's interventions as upgrades to the protagonist's wellbeing. This structure illustrates how allyship can be framed through design, although it also reveals the risk of recentring empowerment in the player's role rather than in the ongoing complexity of trans life.

In sum, positioning the player as an ethical companion rather than a stand-in allows witness-based design to create spaces for partial understanding, affective hesitation and respectful distance. Instead of resolving or repairing narrative tensions, such approaches foreground the open-endedness and ambiguity characteristic of queer temporality. The examples discussed above also indicate the limits of this orientation, since narrative structures can still drift toward recentring the ally's sense of progress and reduce queer experience to a backdrop (Pozo, 2018). In this context, making allyship design meaningful refers not to achieving resolution or improvement, but to sustaining an attentive, non-appropriative relation to queer lives and to the uncertainties that shape them. This emphasis on ongoing complexity sets the stage for the next section, which turns to failure as a generative lens for queer game design.

2.1.2. Queer Game Design Methodologies and Epistemologies

In recent years, queer game studies scholars have argued that making games "queer" involves challenging dominant design norms rather than simply adding LGBTQ characters or themes. Clark and kopas (2015)

urge designers to think of queerness "through design rather than representation", tracing how mainstream conventions of goal-oriented play and win/lose outcomes mirror heteronormative life scripts (Chang, 2017, p.21). Drawing on Halberstam's notion of the "queer art of failure" (2011, p.88), they highlight design principles that embrace purposeless play, glitches and rule subversions as ways to resist straight lines of success. This resistance to linear resolution parallels de Lauretis's analysis of queer texts that frustrate narrativity's pressure toward closure through elliptical, "difficult to read" structures (2011, p.244), inviting audiences to dwell in uncertainty rather than arrive at a single, correct interpretation.

Beyond narrative form, queer strategies also operate at the level of temporality and everyday life. Sara Ahmed's idea that heterosexuality operates as a kind of orientation that organizes daily life —a set of habitual lines we are expected to follow, whereas queerness can disrupt and reorder those spatial and temporal routines (Ahmed, 2006, p.554). By straying from the "straight" paths of normal life, queer perspectives reveal that our everyday habits are not universal truths but conditioned patterns. As Halberstam notes, refusing the pressure to transform every daily act into a step toward a normative success (a promotion, a marriage, etc.) is part of the queer art of failure, which validates ways of living that mainstream culture would call failures or "going nowhere" (Halberstam, 2011, p.88). By embracing non-productivity, delay, or even boredom, queer games critique the relentless productivity and goal-orientation of modern life (which mirrors heteronormative expectations). Ruberg extends this ethos into a specifically ludic register, arguing that games which frustrate, sadden, or "annoy" players carry queer potential because they defy the industry's mandate that games must always be fun, empowering, or neatly resolved (2015, pp.111-113). Her notion of "No Fun" frames discomfort and delay as design values that provoke critical reflection rather than catharsis.

2.1.3. Embodiment and Disorientation: Merleau-Ponty and Ahmed

Both Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Sara Ahmed's queer theory offer rich frameworks for thinking about embodiment in interactive narratives. Merleau-Ponty (1945, pp.54-56) famously argued that our perception of the world is always through our body, and that the body is our anchor in space, the centre from which we orient ourselves. In his view, we do not observe our own body as an object; rather, we perceive with it. Merleau-Ponty shows that we encounter every external object "through our bodies," and our bodily capacities condition how we experience reality. This idea of embodied perception can directly inform game design. It suggests that the physical act of play (the sensation of control, movement, even balance and spatial orientation in a game world) is not a neutral channel but carries meaning. If a game introduces disorientation, for example by using controls that deliberately confuse left and right or a destabilising camera perspective, it directly impacts the player's bodily experience of space rather than only their intellect. For a narrative exploring queer embodiment, drawing attention to the player's body through haptic feedback or uncomfortable interactions could be a way to make them consciously aware of orientation and disorientation as themes. Merleau-Ponty's insight underscores that players feel narratives in their bones, so to speak; thus, an affective game about gender or identity might succeed by crafting moments that disrupt the player's habitual bodily expectations, mirroring the protagonist's sense of physical or temporal "misalignment" with the world.

Sara Ahmed's Queer Phenomenology (2006) builds on phenomenological ideas like Merleau-Ponty's to investigate what it means for certain bodies to be oriented (or disoriented) in social space. Ahmed argues that norms align our bodies along "straight" lines. For example, heterosexuality provides a straight line of life events one is expected to follow, and objects in our world (institutions, family structures, etc.) are arranged to support that orientation (p.74). Queer lives often involve moments of disorientation, when one's lived reality does not align with these normative layouts. As Ahmed (2004, p.158) puts it, queerness can disrupt and reorder space by not following the accepted paths, and a "politics of disorientation" can bring new possibilities into view. Importantly, Ahmed is not using "disorientation" in a purely negative sense; rather, disorientation can be a productive state of being askew, which allows one to see things from oblique angles. In narrative and game terms, this translates to story structures or gameplay that refuse straightforward progression. For instance, a queer temporality might be conveyed through loops, fragments, or out-of-order scenes that leave the player (productively) disoriented regarding time and causality. Indie titles such as *Night in the Woods* (2017) gesture toward this kind of queer temporality through their fragmented pacing, dream sequences, and affective ambiguity, illustrating how disorientation can emerge experientially without prescribing a specific interpretive route for players. Ahmed suggests that by experiencing disorientation, we might reach objects within reach that normally seem "out of place" (pp.33–34). In other words, new understandings or connections become possible when we lose our assumed bearings. Designing with this in mind, one could embrace nonlinearity and spatial confusion in a game's narrative as an analogue to queer experiences of living outside normative timelines.

Taken together, Merleau-Ponty and Ahmed suggest that games can make disorientation palpable by working through the body. Mechanically induced instability —unsteady movement, shifting perspectives, or fragmented timelines— does not merely confuse players cognitively, but also unsettles their habitual orientations. This aligns with Ahmed's (2006, pp.33–34, 554) account of queer disorientation as a productive state in which familiar paths fall away and new objects come into view. For game design, this implies that nonlinearity, spatial confusion and unresolved sequences can formally echo queer experiences of living outside normative timelines. Rather than offering stable resolution, such structures keep players slightly off-balance, enacting queer modes of being where understanding is always partial and ongoing.

2.1.4. Research Gap

Critical scholarship has questioned the dominance of empathy-driven models in game design, showing how they may flatten or instrumentalise marginalised experiences for the benefit of more privileged players (Pozo, 2018). In response, Queer and Feminist Game Studies propose alternative, orientations such as care-based design, discomfort, and relational entanglement(Nakamura, 2020; Dennin & Burton, 2023). These approaches emphasise situated responsibility and embodied attentiveness rather than attempts at identification (Light and Akama, 2014; Pozo, 2018). A parallel strand of queer game theory highlights frustration, opacity and non-closure as core aesthetics of queer play that unsettle normative expectations of mastery or empathic resolution (Ruberg, 2019; Dennin & Burton, 2023). Although these interventions offer powerful critiques of empathy, they rarely specify how such orientations could be enacted through mechanics, interface structures or player positionalities in a way that supports allyship-oriented design (Ruberg, 2020). This absence also explains the hesitation around producing prescriptive allyship toolkits, since rigid formulas risk reinstating normative expectations that conflict with queer commitments to partiality, openness and refusal.

This gap is not only conceptual but methodological. Without frameworks that examine how critical insights intersect with design practice and player interpretation, queer game studies risks producing analyses that remain detached from the processes of making and playing games. The absence of allyship as a design positionality is especially notable. While allyship has been theorised extensively in education, activism and cultural studies, it has received little systematic attention in game design research. Where it does appear, it is often treated as an outcome of empathy rather than a stance in its own right. The result is that players are still encouraged to step into a marginalised identity, rather than to reflect on their own limits and responsibilities when standing alongside others.

This study addresses that gap by foregrounding allyship as a reflexive positionality distinct from empathy. It examines how design might operationalise witnessing, hesitation and partiality as values, positioning players not as omniscient protagonists but as partial witnesses whose solidarity is expressed through limits rather than mastery. By articulating allyship as both a conceptual and procedural orientation, this research aims to bridge the divide between theoretical critique and practical design, offering a framework for how games can structure positions and affordances that invite players to decode allyship as a reflexive, witness-based stance rather than a fully mastered identity.

2.2 Case Study & Social Semiotics Model

To deepen this conceptual foundation, the study adopts a case study analysis focusing on *Dys4ia* (Anthropy, 2012), a semi-autobiographical game that explores gender dysphoria through fragmented micro-games and constrained agency. As Yin (2018, p.35) notes, case studies are particularly suited to exploring contemporary, complex phenomena within real-world contexts, offering a rich understanding of specific design and experiential dynamics. *Dys4ia* is selected because it embodies a formal resistance to linear narrative and resolution, aligning with the study's aim to explore narrative ambiguity and refusal of closure.

This research adopts a social semiotic framework as the core method for analysing the *Dys4ia*. The social semiotic approach, as articulated by Pérez-Latorre, Oliva and Besalú (2017, p.588-589), conceptualises games as multimodal meaning-making systems, where narrative, mechanics, visuals, and player interaction together produce layered interpretations rather than fixed messages (Fernández-Vara, 2019). This approach recognises that games communicate meaning not only through what they show but through how players engage with structural and procedural elements. This framework is chosen for this research because it is particularly suited to analysing queer game texts, where ambiguity, non-linearity, and open-endedness are crucial design strategies that resist heteronormative teleologies and representational closure (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017; de Lauretis, 2011). By focusing on formal and experiential design elements, social semiotics allows the researcher to understand how queerness is structurally encoded beyond explicit story content.

While reflexive and autoethnographic approaches in Game Studies can foreground the researcher's embodied position and lived experience of play, especially in work on queerness and situated cultures (Lammes, 2007), this study deliberately keeps such biographical narration in the background. Instead of recentring the ally researcher's story, the analysis prioritises how formal structures and multimodal resources encode partial perspectives within the game text itself. Social semiotics is therefore adopted because it enables a systematic focus on mechanics, interface cues, and audiovisual design as meaning-making choices that position players in specific ways (Pérez-Latorre et al., 2017; Fernández-Vara, 2019; Toh, 2018). Reflexive awareness still informs the interpretation of these patterns, but it operates as an ethical and analytical orientation rather than a primary object of description, aligning the method with the study's concern for witnessing and partiality rather than confessional self-representation. At the same time, this semiotic approach is used with awareness of queer games' investment in fragmentation and anti-structure; rather than imposing rigidity, it serves to trace how such disruptions are formally produced and where their indeterminacies remain.

Within this framework, two analytical dimensions proposed by Pérez-Latorre et al. (2017, p.588-589) are prioritised: ludo-narrative design and designer-player positioning. The first dimension, ludo-narrative design, examines how gameplay structures, episodic fragmentation, and non-linear sequences disrupt traditional narrative closure and foster ambiguity. This enables analysis of how design choices formally embody queer temporal logics by refusing heteronormative narrative resolutions (Halberstam, 2011, p.89). The second dimension, designer-player positioning (p.590), investigates how constrained agency and interpretive gaps shape the player's role not as an omnipotent agent but as a partial witness. This aligns with the study's reflex-

ive ally perspective, supporting Haraway's (1988) and Ahmed's (2006) emphasis on partial perspectives and situated knowledge.

Following Fernández-Vara's (2019) emphasis on segmenting games for analytical clarity, this analysis would first divide *Dys4ia* into discrete narrative and mechanical units, including individual scenes, episodes, or interactive micro-games. For each segment, the researcher will carefully document gameplay mechanics, narrative interruptions, player constraints, and audiovisual cues. Using the ludo-narrative design dimension, the researcher will map how fragmented structures and metaphoric mechanics disrupt linear progression and resist teleological resolution, highlighting specific points of ambiguity and interpretive openness (Pérez-Latorre et al., 2017).

To operationalise this framework, the study employs two structured tables corresponding to the selected dimensions. Following Pérez-Latorre et al. (2017), the ludo-narrative design dimension attends to aspects such as character/player representation, world representation, and core activities (p.594) (Table 1), while the designer-player positioning dimension considers tutorials, guidance, and feedback (Table 2) (p.590). These categories provide analytical consistency, ensuring that each segment of *Dys4ia* can be systematically coded and interpreted.

Table 1. Ludo-Narrative Design

Scene / Mechanic	Narration
Medical bureaucracy (magnifying glass search, tedious green background)	Encodes the hostile, tedious institution; the joy of success undermined by next frame.
Waiting rooms, weight checks, HIV test, taking medication, Eating sweets…	Daily-life routines emphasis repetition and banality.
Hormone side effects (slow walking under blood pressure)	Player's input vs. sluggish output conveys bodily exhaustion.
Mouth attacks (pre/post surgery, reflection of shield)	Repetition of hostile attacks despite hormone therapy, demonstrates ongoing rejection; aligns with "no closure."

Source: table created by the author

Table 2. Designer-Player Positioning

Scene / Mechanic	Designer–Player Positioning
Opening abstract fragmented visuals	Sets discomfort and disorientation, player positioned as uneasy witness.
No ending (returns to menu)	Removes closure, erases sense of achievement; positions player as witness to non-resolution.

Source: table created by the author

By combining descriptive mapping with critical interpretation, this method enables a reproducible, detailed examination of how meaning is structurally encoded in queer game texts through both design mechanics and player experience, providing a rigorous foundation that directly supports the study's theoretical and ethical commitments.

3. Results

Anna Anthropy's *Dys4ia* (2012), a semi-autobiographical game about gender transition, is the central case study. Composed of fragmented micro-games that advance abruptly regardless of success or failure, the game denies mastery or closure and instead conveys an ongoing, disjointed process. These formal features align with this study's concern for ambiguity, deferred understanding, and the refusal of resolution as aspects of queer temporality.

Unlike many commercial titles that frame allyship through reconciliatory or success-driven endings, *Dys4ia* resists such arcs. Its constrained mechanics and refusal of a tidy conclusion position the player as a limited witness rather than an omnipotent saviour, offering a compact text that speaks directly to the study's methodological and theoretical commitments. Building on this framework, the analysis proceeds in two stages: first, how fragmented mechanics operate at the level of ludo-narrative design; second, how the game positions players through constrained agency and feedback.

3.1. Ludo-narrative Design Analysis

This section applies the lens of ludo-narrative design to *Dys4ia*, focusing on how fragmented mechanics structure character, world, and core activities. The following examples illustrate these dynamics.

3.1.1. Clinic / Magnifying glass (Figure 1)

In an early vignette, the player is instructed to "find a good clinic" (Figure 1). The screen displays a grid of small, near-identical houses against a fluorescent green background. To progress, the player must move a large purple magnifying glass slowly across the rows, revealing one building marked as correct. The mechanic restricts vision to a narrow circular scope, requiring repetitive lateral sweeps rather than efficient scanning.

The task offers little variation or reward. Text instructions are minimal, and no feedback is given until the correct house is located, at which point the vignette ends abruptly. There is no scoring system, timer, or cel-

ebratory confirmation; taking longer or missing the correct target has no consequence beyond prolonging the routine. The player's activity is therefore less about achievement than attrition, advancing only through persistence.

**Figure 1.** Now to find a good clinic

Source: Screenshot from *Dys4ia* (Anthropy, 2012).

3.1.2. Waiting Room & Medical Routines (Figures 2-6)

A later sequence condenses everyday clinical procedures into successive mini-games. The player first waits out a countdown in a clinic lobby, then steps onto a scale, receives an HIV test result, monitors blood pressure and administers estradiol. One vignette depicts hormonal side effects through a simple eating game in which an avatar moves with the arrow keys to consume food. Across these tasks, inputs remain basic and repetitive: pressing single keys, moving along obvious paths, or waiting for a timer to expire. Visuals are schematic, and text instructions are minimal, while feedback does little more than confirm completion before cutting to the next scene. Progress is therefore experienced less as achievement than endurance, as the game proceduralises the banality and exhaustion of medicalisation through cycles of small, compulsory actions rather than rewards or mastery.

Figures 2 and 3. (First) Waiting room sequence. (Second) Weighing routine
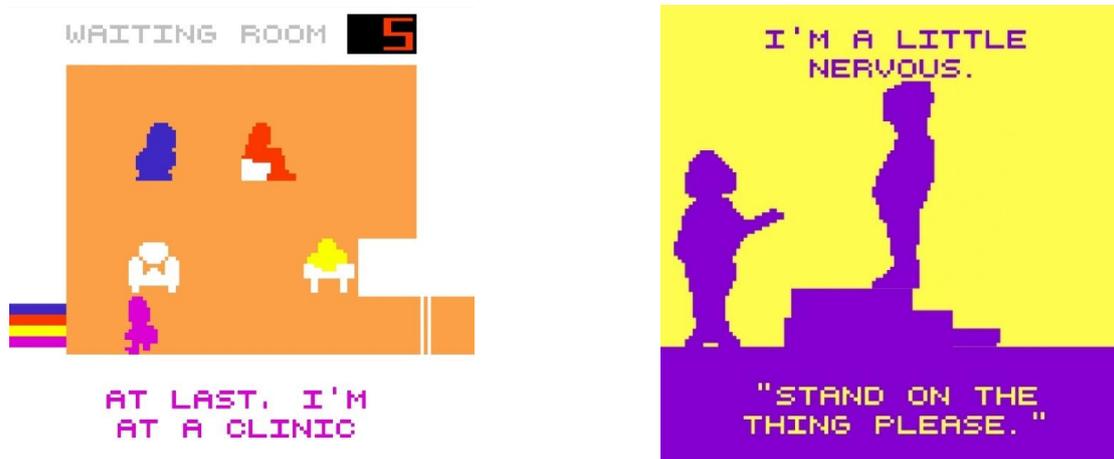
Source: Screenshot from *Dys4ia* (Anthropy, 2012).

Figures 4, 5 and 6. (First) HIV Testing Mini-Game in Dys4ia. (Second) Blood Pressure Check. (Third) Medication Mini-game.
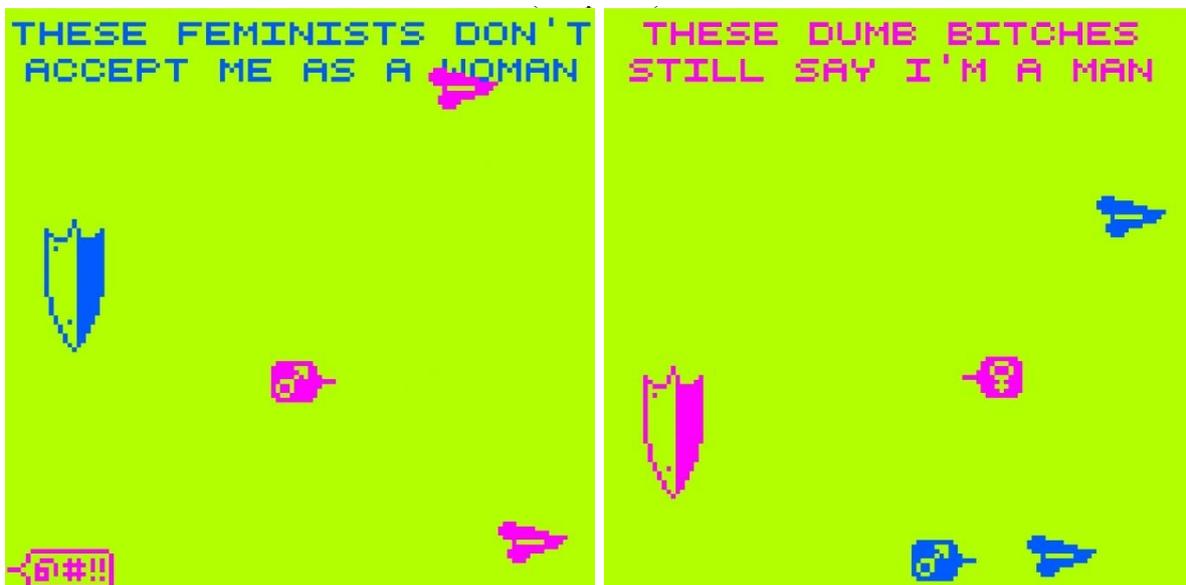

Source: Screenshot from *Dys4ia* (Anthropy, 2012).

3.1.3. Mouth Attacks (Figures 7-8)

In both the opening and closing chapters, the player faces hostile mouths that rush across the screen while hostile phrases appear above, denying the protagonist's womanhood. The only means of response is to move a shield into position and intercept the incoming attacks. In the earlier scene (Figure 7), the shield is marked with simple, non-assertive symbols, functioning mainly as a gesture of defense. After undergoing hormone treatment later in the game (Figure 8), the same mechanic reappears, but the shield now carries affirming symbols such as "♀" or textual declarations of identity, visually signifying confidence and self-recognition.

Yet this apparent shift does not alter the outcome. The attacks continue in identical form, the insults remain unchanged, and the vignette concludes only when the sequence runs its course. Whether defended with neutral or affirming symbols, the player never achieves decisive victory or recognition. Instead, the act of blocking is reiterated as a cycle: external denial persists, and progress is defined by endurance rather than resolution. By juxtaposing pre- and post-treatment scenes, the game underscores that even after affirmation, social acceptance is withheld, highlighting the continuity of rejection beneath the surface of personal change.

Figures 7 and 8. (First) Mouth Attack Mini-Game (Chapter 1). (Second) Mouth Attack Mini-Game (Chapter 1)

Source: Screenshot from *Dys4ia* (Anthropy, 2012).

3.2. Designer-Player Design Analysis

The second stage considers *Dys4ia* through designer-player positioning, analysing how instructions, difficulty, and feedback configure the player's role. This highlights how players are situated not as omnipotent agents but as recipients of constrained agency.

3.2.1. Fragmented visuals

At the very start of *Dys4ia*, the player encounters a series of short, disconnected screens. Visuals are highly abstract: flat pixelated shapes, sudden colour changes, and isolated icons appear without explanation. Each scene shifts abruptly to the next, with no transitional animation or narrative link, producing the sense of fragments rather than a continuous sequence.

Instructions are minimal. A line of text may announce the action, such as moving an icon across the screen, but rarely explains its meaning or consequence. Input requirements vary from one vignette to another: some ask for arrow-key movement, others a single keystroke, and some advance automatically without any interaction. Success or failure is barely distinguished, as the game often progresses regardless of how the player responds.

From the first moments, the player is placed in a state of uncertainty. Progress depends on adjusting quickly to new demands, yet each task is brief and quickly replaced, preventing mastery or accumulation of skill. The opening thus establishes an unstable rhythm in which advancement is continuous but coherence remains out of reach.

3.2.2. No Ending (Figures 9-10)

After completing all four chapters, the game does not provide a victory screen, epilogue, or final cutscene. Instead, it directly states "it's just the beginning" (Figure 9) and returns directly to the main menu (Figure 10). No message confirms success, no statistics are displayed, and no new content is unlocked. The transition is abrupt, identical to the way earlier vignettes advance between scenes.

For the player, the absence of an ending means that completion feels indistinguishable from interruption. Whether they have followed every prompt correctly or struggled through earlier tasks, the result is the same: the game simply loops back to its starting frame. This design removes the usual sense of closure associated with finishing a game and prevents the experience from resolving into a single outcome.

Figures 9 and 10. (First) Main Menu of Dys4ia Before Gameplay. (Second) Caption Before Returning to Menu
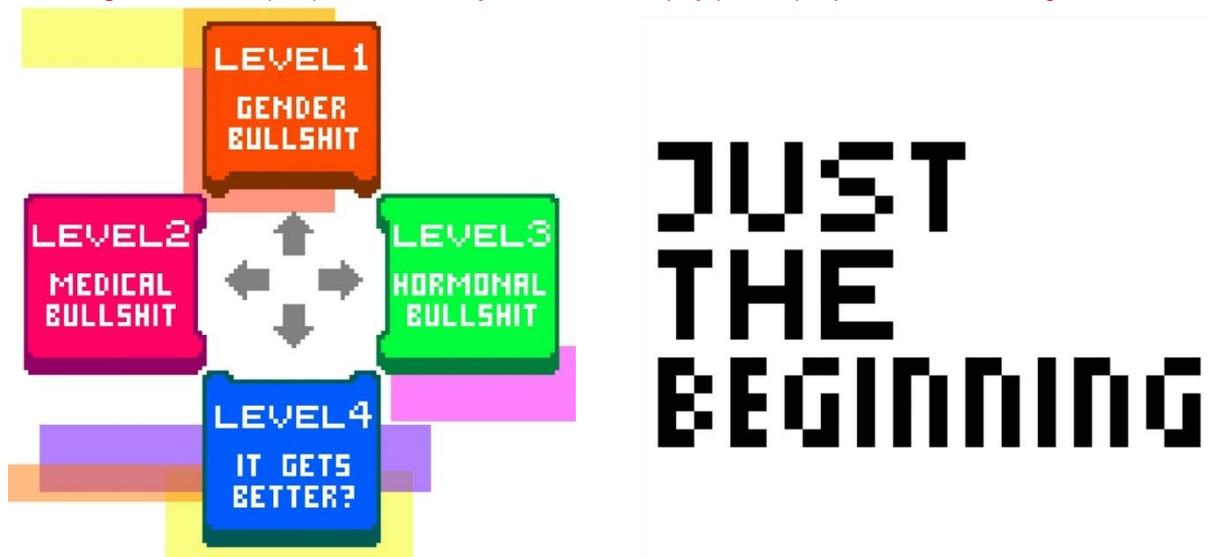
Source: Screenshot from *Dys4ia* (Anthropy, 2012).

By withholding an explicit ending, *Dys4ia* frames progression as temporary and provisional. The return to the menu functions less as a reward than as a reset, signalling that the experience is ongoing rather than concluded.

4. Discussion

The case study of *Dys4ia* demonstrates how fragmented mechanics, banal routines, and constrained agency consistently undermine mastery and closure. Across multiple vignettes, progression is structured around endurance, repetition, and provisional outcomes rather than skill or resolution. These results foreground partial perspectives and disorientation as central features of play.

The question that follows is what these findings mean beyond the analysis of a single text. How can the strategies identified in *Dys4ia* inform approaches to designing games that position non-queer players as allies? More specifically, in what ways might mechanics of failure, discomfort, and non-closure serve as ethical alternatives to the dominant model of empathy-driven design?

4.1. Theoretical Implications of Dys4ia

The patterns identified in *Dys4ia* crystallise design values that queer game scholars associate with resistance to normative play. Ruberg (2015, pp.111–113) argues that mechanics which deny immediate gratification challenge the assumption that games should always be pleasurable, and *Dys4ia* achieves this through waiting-room timers, repetitive medical checks and side-effect sequences that feel more draining than rewarding. These micro-games make players dwell in discomfort, refusing the sense of progress typically promised by game systems. This refusal converges with Halberstam's (2011, p.88) account of the political potential of practices that do not culminate in recognisable success, reframing incompletion and going "off-script" as forms of critique rather than failure.

Dys4ia's abrupt visual and mechanical shifts reinforce this partial perspective. Players recalibrate from one unfamiliar demand to another without accumulating expertise, mirroring Haraway's (1988, p.583) account of situated knowledge. The repeated "Mouth Attack" sequences further show that affirmation does not resolve misrecognition; hostility persists, framing progress as endurance rather than mastery.

Finally, the return to the menu instead of a definitive ending illustrates what de Lauretis (2011, p. 258) identifies as a refusal of representational resolution, and corresponds with Chang's (2017, p. 21) emphasis on openness as a design value that privileges continuation rather than finality. Instead of a singular conclusion, *Dys4ia* leaves players with a suspended state, where transition is represented not as a finished event but as a process without a clear endpoint.

4.2. Implications for Allyship Game Design

Dys4ia's mechanics also model an ally-like form of engagement. Instead of encouraging identification, the game keeps players at a distance, positioning them as witnesses with limited understanding. This suggests that allyship design can emphasise constrained viewpoints rather than immersive substitution, encouraging reflection on positionality rather than mastery.

This positioning carries a distinct moral justification. Ruberg (2020) and others argue that re-staging queer suffering risks collapsing solidarity into voyeurism when such pain is presented as consumable narrative. In contrast, *Dys4ia* demonstrates that mechanics can evoke discomfort without aestheticising trauma. Its timers, repetitive routines, and defensive sequences shift frustration onto the structure of play itself. When translated into allyship contexts, such design choices make frustration the ally's own. Their inability to overcome barriers or resolve hostility is not a failure of play but a reflection of structural limitation. In this way, mechanics of delay and repetition expose the boundaries of allyship, highlighting the reality that allies cannot provide full recognition or final resolution. Accepting partiality therefore becomes an ethical stance, a clear acknowledgement that allyship is necessarily incomplete yet still valuable in its persistence.

Translating queer design values into allyship games requires close attention to how the ally-player is positioned. One pathway is fragmentation. Queer texts frequently resist linear progression toward a single resolution (de Lauretis, 2011, p. 258), and *Dys4ia* enacts this through disconnected episodes that never consolidate into mastery. When applied to allyship contexts, fragmentation can emphasise the limits of comprehension. The ally can intervene within isolated moments but never assembles a complete understanding. This design choice reflects Haraway's (1988, p. 583) account of situated knowledge, highlighting that allyship involves partial recognition rather than totalising control. The emphasis rests not on recreating queer experience but on the ally's incomplete and often imperfect attempts to engage with it.

A second pathway is frustration, which Ruberg (2015, pp. 111-113) describes as mechanics that slow, obstruct, or diminish agency shift attention away from pleasure and toward structural limitation. In *Dys4ia*, delays and repetitive tasks create effort that does not culminate in mastery. Reinterpreted for allyship, such mechanics do not dramatise queer suffering but instead foreground the ally's repeated inability to achieve resolution. For allies, encountering stalled or inconclusive play demonstrates how solidarity often takes shape through unfinished gestures rather than completed achievements. Failure becomes a reminder that systemic barriers cannot be overcome through individual determination. Frustration therefore functions ethically by directing discomfort to the ally-player's position, showing that solidarity requires persistence in the face of limitation rather than the gratification of triumph.

The third pathway is non-closure, which reframes how allyship is represented at the level of endings. Queer theory has long identified openness as a central value, for instance through Chang's (2017, p. 21) account of aperture or de Lauretis's (2011, p. 258) discussion of texts that resist final resolution. *Dys4ia* embodies this value by returning players to its menu rather than rewarding them with a conclusive ending. For allyship games, adopting similar structures ensures that solidarity is not framed as a task that can be completed once and for all. Cyclical resets or open-ended epilogues can remind players that their efforts are always provisional and incomplete. Such structures also extend Ahmed's (2006, p. 554) account of disorientation, as allies are required to inhabit a space of continual recalibration where interventions never result in mastery but instead affirm accountability as an ongoing process.

Taken together, fragmentation, frustration, and non-closure transform queer temporalities into design tools that emphasise the ally's partial, misaligned, and unfinished role. By making misunderstanding, delay, and incompleteness central to play, these design strategies avoid the appropriation of queer experience and instead frame allyship as a form of ethical witnessing. The result is an experience of standing alongside rather than substituting for those whose lives are represented.

4.3. Future Directions for Allyship Game Design

The discussion so far has demonstrated how queer design values such as failure, unsettlement, and non-closure can be adapted to frame allyship ethically. Yet these proposals are only an initial step, and future research must continue to refine both the conceptual and practical foundations of allyship game design.

One promising direction is collaborative practice-based research. Designing games that address allyship requires the involvement of queer creators and players, not simply as consultants but as co-authors of the design process. Such collaboration can help to avoid the risk of reproducing a single, externalised perspective and ensures that the values embedded in mechanics emerge from dialogue rather than unilateral interpretation. A second direction concerns the development of explicit ethical frameworks. While this article has outlined how mechanics of frustration or non-closure may prevent empathy tourism, there is still a need

for a systematic articulation of allyship game design ethics. This framework would delineate boundaries that guard against appropriation, specifying how designers can evoke discomfort for allies without aestheticising queer pain or re-staging trauma.

Methodological refinement also remains crucial. Combining social semiotics with participatory design would allow future scholars to examine not only how mechanics gesture toward allyship but also how players negotiate, reshape or resist these meanings in practice. Rather than stabilising allyship as something to be verified, such approaches would foreground the situated ways in which players inhabit witness positions within games, tracing tensions and openings without collapsing them into fixed outcomes. These directions are therefore articulated as orientations rather than a reproducible checklist, in order to avoid turning allyship into a normalising template and to preserve the indeterminacy, failure and non-closure that queer game design values.

In conclusion, reflective allyship game design can employ strategies of failure, disorientation, and non-closure to communicate queer temporalities without collapsing into empathy tourism. The contribution of this study lies in outlining a morally defensible pathway for positioning allies within game mechanics. Future research will benefit from cross-disciplinary collaboration, integrating insights from queer theory, game studies, and participatory practice to expand the methodological repertoire of queer game design.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how game design, from a reflexive ally perspective, can express ambiguity, deferred understanding and the refusal of closure as aspects of queer temporality. Rather than treating the case study as an example of allyship or suggesting authorial intent, the analysis focused on how *Dys4ia*'s formal and temporal structures illustrate fragmentation, constrained agency and non-resolution. These qualities reveal how interactive form can sustain ambiguity and partial understanding. Through a critical literature review and a social semiotic analysis, the study explored how failure, interruption and misalignment can operate as intentional design values that resist closure. This approach answers the core research question by showing how queer temporal structures may inform allyship-oriented design through attentiveness, hesitation and the acceptance of incomplete understanding, rather than through attempts to solve or resolve queer experience.

The contributions of the research are both theoretical and methodological. Theoretically, it introduces a standing beside allyship stance in game design, where the ally or designer does not attempt to inhabit queer identity or produce heroic resolutions, but instead facilitates partial, witnessing experiences grounded in humility and respect for difference. This perspective reframes allyship as a matter of situated attentiveness rather than mastery or empathic substitution. Methodologically, the study demonstrates how a reflexive literature review can be combined with social semiotic analysis to examine how mechanics and narrative structures express queer temporality, for example, through fragmentation and deferred progression. These methods extend existing Queer Game Studies by offering an integrative approach that links critique with formal analysis. At the same time, the study acknowledges the limitations of an ally perspective. As the researcher is a non queer designer, the account remains partial and shaped by outsider experience. Any allyship-oriented framework proposed here can therefore operate only as a situated heuristic rather than a universal model, and its applicability will vary across queer contexts and design practices. This reflexive stance, which recognises the risks of misalignment, underscores that the strategies proposed here would be strengthened through direct collaboration with queer creators and players to ensure plurality and authenticity of viewpoints.

Looking ahead, there are several avenues for future research and practice that can further develop the allyship approach to game design. First, participatory and co-design methods should be applied in the creation of new digital games. By collaborating directly with queer communities as designers, consultants, or playtesters, allies can ensure that both mechanics and narratives reflect a genuine stance of "standing with." Second, the principles of ambiguity and open-endedness can be extended across different game genres. Role-playing games, interactive fiction, multiplayer formats, and immersive VR experiences all offer opportunities to test how allyship-oriented design functions in varied contexts, from everyday intimacy to complex intersectional struggles. Finally, future work can explore how these strategies operate across different gaming platforms and industry settings, from independent games distributed through platforms such as itch.io to larger-scale productions that reach broader audiences. Across these directions, the guiding aim remains the same: to deepen the reflexive ally perspective in game design, refining ways for non-queer designers to create meaningfully in solidarity with queer communities. By prioritizing collaboration, embracing uncertainty, and working across diverse gaming formats, this research path envisions a design practice where difference is acknowledged as the foundation of solidarity rather than an obstacle to it.

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