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A Night for Flesh and Roses: An Exploration in Flesh Remixing and the Sublime  
Transgender Grotesque

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
SANTA CRUZ

**A NIGHT FOR FLESH AND ROSES:  
AN EXPLORATION IN FLESH REMIXING AND THE SUBLIME  
TRANSGENDER GROTESQUE**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

DIGITAL ARTS & NEW MEDIA

by

**Elliot Rex White**

June 2024

The Thesis of Elliot Rex White  
is approved:

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Professor Michael Chemers, chair

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Professor Marcia Ochoa

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Professor Elizabeth Swensen

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Peter Biehl  
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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2024

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## **Abstract**

### A NIGHT FOR FLESH AND ROSES: AN EXPLORATION IN FLESH REMIXING AND THE SUBLIME TRANSGENDER GROTESQUE

By Elliot Rex White

The transgender body is a liminal space that refuses to exist in neat categories. As such, it is often considered a monstrous body. By examining how transgender people reclaim the monstrous and grotesque, I created a game that positions players as subjects of new, speculative bodies of desire. Utilizing analogue collage and stop motion animation techniques, *A Night for Flesh and Roses* is a narrative video game set in a transmedia installation investigating what a body can be in a post-human world. Players create characters out of 19th century anatomical illustrations while navigating relationships with monsters similar to themselves who refuse to align with what a “normal” body is expected to be. By creating new body configurations, we can envision a world that embraces a larger, flexible, more intersectional definition of humanity that embraces boundless possibilities and, therefore, see humanity in those for whom it has been denied.



## **Acknowledgements and Dedication**

Thank you to Colleen Jennings for essential production assistance and making my physical installation possible as well as providing much needed sanity. Thank you to my committee members Michael Chemers, Marcia Ochoa, and Elizabeth Swensen for guiding my research, providing excellent feedback on my work, and supporting my weirdness. Other thank you's to Livia Perez, Partick Ballard, and Kristopher Funk for providing their wonderful voices heard throughout the game. Thank you to Jordan Fickel for providing audio production guidance and sound samples. Thank you to all the anonymous online players who gave me early feedback on my game and helped encourage me to continue. And a huge thank you to my mother who has been supportive of my work no matter how strange it gets.

Dedicated to all the trans weirdos who feel alone.

I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine. I challenge you to risk abjection and flourish as well as have I. Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself.

-Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix" (247)

## **I. Introduction: Enter the Flesh Dimension**

Sutured, stitched, flayed skin; the body opened up is an intense location for horror. Inside all of us lurk forms that flourish in nightmarish illustrations and imaginations. The body's fluids and flaws become unnerving. What happens when an already tense relationship with the complex, still not completely understood, human body gets even messier? In the case of gender, the monster of ambiguity looms over naturalized expectations of male and female behavior, appearance, and social roles. If not only gender, but sex itself, is a flimsy construction, just as many human made devices, it leads to the question: what else can be changed in our world? What other truths come into question if something as important as sex can fall apart?

Like many other threats to the status quo, gender disruptions can only tenuously exist. If fluidity exists at all, it must be understood as a divergence from an acceptable normal. As such the transgender<sup>1</sup> body is often considered to be a type of pathology; deeply interwoven with the medical system and frequently dependent upon it for desired interventions such as hormones and surgery. Because these structures were

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<sup>1</sup> And the many equivalent names throughout histories and cultures for gender variant individuals who may or may not be socially accepted.

primarily created by those who would not describe themselves as trans, the standards a trans person must fit into in order to access these interventions police behavior.

Here we see the middle ground of bodies, ones that may not wish to follow all of the “medically necessary steps,” or ones that do, but present themselves in ways counter to the dominant heteropatriarchal structure: A body that can never truly be considered normal, nor cured.

Neither right nor wrong, trans bodies are what I consider remixed bodies, taking parts and pieces and making new meaning with them, drawing from the inhuman, the monstrous, and evolving into curious new beings. By doing so, there can be new possibilities for human existence that cannot be bound by sexual rigidity, which I would argue runs counter to the intrinsically elastic, ever changing nature of human life. While embracing this flesh remixing, can the mechanics that bring it into being – the suture, the stitch, the scrambling of inside and outside – hold some sort of grotesque beauty?

The grotesque is absurd, outlandish, but at the same time fantastic; it is what Italian art history researcher Maria Fabricius Hansen describes as “... hybrid monstrosity and metamorphosis” (Hansen, 4.1). Human, animal, and monster characteristics blur descriptive boundaries making the familiar alien. The grotesque’s transformative nature makes it a compelling fantastical counterpart to the pragmatic aspects of gender transition.

Finding desire and empowerment within horror and the grotesque, I’ve designed

a video game that presents players with pieces to collage their own understandings of their bodies. *A Night for Flesh and Roses* exists independently and within a larger installation that expands the collaged, meaty, game world into physical space for people to traverse. Throughout the game, players have conversations with alien looking beings made up of pieces from *Gray's Anatomy* illustrations. Characters ponder about how their changing bodies can exist, what they want, and where they're going next in a far flung, less than perfect future. Contrasting with many other games that feature character customization mechanics, the opening scene does not give the player a default body. Rather, the player is only given a mixture of anatomical parts, organs, bones, and other tissues, that can be dragged together as a Frankensteinian mashup to create entirely unique combinations. When players let go of what they expect a human to be, players come to question why certain bodies are considered more desirable than others and find connection with other digital beings who have similarly monstrous forms. Avoiding "the true trans experience," this monsterification (the act of becoming a monster) becomes a site of empowering identity outside of any acceptable transformations.

When I refer to "monsters," I am working within the definition described by both Jeffery Cohen in "Monster Culture Seven Theses" and Jack Halberstam's *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. The monster becomes a technology to understand deviance, abnormalities, and a machine to produce fear in "normals." It allows a culture to point to "others" and to conceive of what an

appropriate human being “should” be. When these boundaries, such as normative gender and sexual being, are crossed, society turns transness into a vilifying monstrosity.

The history linking transness and monstrosity ranges from depictions of fictionalized “hermaphrodites” in Medieval European art analyzed in Leah DeVun’s writing to contemporary analogies of the man-made Frankenstein’s monsters illustrated in Susan Stryker’s piece “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix.” The depiction of mixed sex bodies in Medieval culture evoke disgust and curiosity, a frightening other applied to non-European and non-Christian peoples, while Stryker’s piece is an expression of trans rage, seeing herself within the monster’s unnatural state.

These monsters go beyond heteropatriarchal norms for men and women, instead offering other possibilities in bodies and attraction. Eva Hayward and Sandy Stone, in their respective pieces “Lessons from a Starfish” and “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” they look at what expectations exist for trans people in order to have access to medical interventions as well as deconstructing the “wrong body” metaphor.

Games are a unique medium to have embodied experiences. Even with pre-programmed possible responses, games encourage a deeper understanding with immediate feedback. It becomes a necessary medium for exploring trans themes. By presenting a speculative future, my work makes tangible the nebulous ideas offered

within trans studies, imagining the most radical outcome of what possible new bodies can mean; a body without limits. My work is in a lineage of games such as the monstrous gender explored in *GENDERWRECKED*, the frustration dealing with the medical industrial complex in *Sorry, We Have a Policy*, and many others.

Instead of transgender surgery being used to shock, to argue for its disgusting nature, can grotesque anatomical imagery be reclaimed as a powerful image of bodily autonomy? A kind of grotesque, monstrous body that is no less valuable than an “unchanged” body. This involves encountering the complicated reality of surgery, medicine, and body morphing techniques that are often a long and painful process. If the elements of grotesque beauty in the fleshy, remixed trans body can be empowering, then transphobic images lose some of their power. Trans pain, horror, struggle, survival, pleasure, and beauty can all intermingle into an ever changing, collaged tapestry in my work, *A Night for Flesh and Roses*.

## II. Collage, Surgery, and other experiential methods

During my production and writing process, my understanding of the subject matter came through my practice as well as phenomenological experience. What started as a simple goal to hollow out a copy of *Gray's Anatomy* for use as a prop in a live action game<sup>2</sup> turned into a stack of body parts that begged to have another life beyond their cadaver others. Through the act of cutting various anatomical diagrams and collaging new beings, I came to a greater understanding of the interrelationship between collage, surgery<sup>3</sup>, and transness. The story I developed, as well as the erotic undertones, came from the delicate handling and manipulating of these various paper organs. The monsters I created were grafted together in ways that broke taxonomies present in the original text, crossing boundaries similar to how trans identity crosses gender boundaries.

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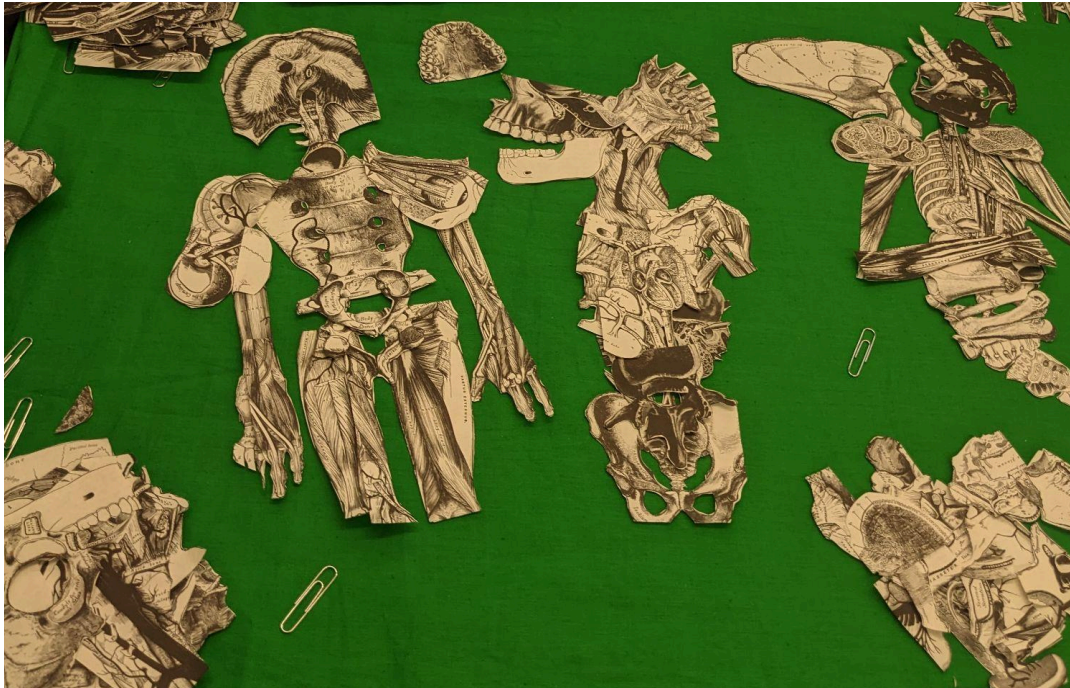
<sup>2</sup> *Will you follow me?* (2022-3) is a live action narrative experience created by myself and Kristopher Funk that incorporated various props. One of which was a hollowed out book used to hide a cassette tape; it just so happened that *Gray's Anatomy* was the thickest and cheapest book at the local thrift store.

<sup>3</sup> The X-Acto knife to paper as the scalpel to skin. Most scalpels work the same way as craft blades but are sharper and sterile. Both come in many fun shapes!



**Fig 2.1** Concept sketches after taking stock of the variety of pieces I had at my disposal. Some, such as the center and bottom right, are very similar to their collaged puppet counterparts.





**Fig 2.2** Initial puppet construction against green screen fabric background. This setup was used to create the stop motion animations with transparency.

This gave me a frame of reference for my trans and post-human research, that is to say research on beings that exist beyond current definitions of human, opening possibilities for bodies previously not considered. I brought this collage analogy to my own personal experiences with surgery and hormones, so that it becomes not just a fictionalized concept but rather part of a lived reality.

At the same time, I was in the process of scheduling surgery myself. The reality of not just being splayed open, but also the reactionary transphobia I was fed through social media, YouTube ads, and news articles made me more adamant to pursue the grotesque as an important aesthetic theme. I was increasingly aware of the trust I placed in surgeons reaching inside of me and used my work to answer the question of

how that private, unconscious intimacy would change in a world where it was conscious, pleasurable, and done at the whim of fantastical desires with like minded(bodied) folks. My personal experience with the medical system combined with the grueling recovery process heavily influenced the story I came to tell and what other trans players will immediately identify.

By documenting how others responded to the finished game as well as the installation, I was able to see how effective my work was at evoking these themes and if I was successful in reclaiming the grotesque for transgender power. From the positive reception and readiness of the public to immerse themselves in this world, I would argue I greatly succeeded.

### III. Trans Monstrosity and Pathologization

The monster is a cultural body. It is a thing that houses any number of fears, anxieties, and others. Jeffery Cohen argues in his much cited “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” that the monster is an indicator of a kind of deviancy: a thing that threatens the stability of a community. The monster often involves crossing boundaries that previously were never imagined or allowed to be crossed. Depending on the cultural context of the monster, what it means and who it might be pointing towards changes (Cohen, 4). As Halberstam articulates on the nature of monsters and humans, “Monsters have to be everything the human is not, and in producing the negative of human, these novels make way for the invention of human as white, male, middle class, and heterosexual” (Halberstam, 166). From a western perspective, the existence of the monster is what enables there to be a default, normal, and arguably superior body compared to the deviant, perverse, and destructive body of the monster. The monster cannot look or act like how “proper” human beings should, and for that it must be pushed out of a society or defeated like the endings of countless monster movies. Because of this, it is common for atypical sexual existence to be a fixture of modern monsters.

Why such a fixation on sex? There are many other behaviors considered deviant, however modern monsters revolve around sexuality and gender (Halberstam,

7). While this has been noted extensively in contemporary monsters<sup>4</sup>, gender, sex, and sexuality have been a key part of not just early modern monsters but also defining humanity itself. By creating rigid constructions of sex, the human can be more easily controlled. This discussion will primarily be from European history as its conception of gender and monstrosity are necessary for my work as well as how it will most likely be interpreted, however there are many other varied gendered histories that should be considered.

Early European gender wasn't always so binary, or at the very least it was more fluid. Prior to the 13th century, the Hippocratic<sup>5</sup> school of thought was dominant (DeVun 2014, 463). Gender was considered to be more or less a combination of masculine or feminine energy, but its concentration would determine the sex characteristics of an individual as well as their behavior. This means that it was possible for there to be gender blending. In a way, it was ahead of its time as it had some awareness that compounds, similar to the contemporary understanding of sex hormones, exist in the body to varying degrees that don't always present in a binary way.

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<sup>4</sup> 19th-21st century vampires, the messy gender and sexuality of Buffalo Bill, as well as others. See Halberstam, *Skin Shows* for more detail on this subject.

<sup>5</sup> Think of the four humors and vaguely defined "energies" present in practices such as alchemy.



**Fig. 3.1** Fusions and hybrid human-animal bodies that display multiple sex characteristics in “Monstrous races.” *Mare historiarum*, Bibliothèque nationale de France. Accessed through DeVun (2021).

Illuminated manuscripts depicting “monstrous races” echo the strange, fluid sexed bodies of the Medieval world as well as the curiosity and fear of distant lands seemingly full of unimaginable monsters. Seen in figure 3.1, many of these monstrous beings were depicted as “hermaphrodites” that had a penis as well as a vulva, many of which had breasts or a breast on one side with a flat chest on the other. This imagery reflected the alchemical idea of a perfect fusion between masculinity and femininity, however it also suggested promiscuity or beast-like qualities. 12th and

13th century European manuscript illustrators depicted Muslim and Jewish figures with mixed sex and animal characteristics. Divergence from Christianity, seen as essential to define humanity in Europe, was used to justify depicting Jews and Muslims as hyper-sexual and being closer to animals than human beings making them into real life monsters (DeVun 2014, 469). This extended to the depiction of animals as well.



**Fig. 3.2** An illustration depicting the hyena with a focus on the large clitoris present in female hyenas that is used to give birth. *Aberdeen Bestiary*, University of Aberdeen. Accessed through DeVun (2021)

For the hyena, seen in figure 3.2, its ambiguous genitalia proved its wickedness and its threat to man (DeVun 2014, 473). This lasting visual impact on mixed sex bodies<sup>6</sup> connoting promiscuity and sinful behavior are still seen today through contemporary transphobia.

However, this fluid sexed way of thinking began to fall out of favor by the mid 13th century, replaced by new studies of Aristotlian texts. Gone were the days of blurry masculine and feminine energies, here were the rigid boxes of male and female with the impossibility of “true hermaphrodites.” Any human being that appeared to be sexually ambiguous was considered to have a biological defect and there was always a dominant, “true” sex present, either female or male (DeVun 2014, 463). Not only were scholars such as Thomas Aquinas helping to construct a new image of the human, they were also putting the human in comparison to other animals. Gender studies and cosmetic surgery scholar Camille Nurka points out that while sex is given importance and is used to understand the other creatures on Earth, it is far from the norm, saying “...human dimorphic sexuality is downright weird in comparison with the multiple sexual morphologies found across the far vaster field of nonhuman animal and plant species” (Nurka, 219). Binary sex is not a universal fact about the world, it’s even more uncommon than alternatives. Not only did the view of sex

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<sup>6</sup> Whether by birth in the case of intersex individuals and/or (as intersex individuals can also be transgender) transgender people whose bodies have diverged from a prior perisex (term in the intersex community for non-intersex individuals with consistent binary sex characteristics) state due to hormones and/or surgery.

change, but it was used to prove the dominion of men over the Earth, arguing that because humans are – through the lens of Christianity – the most perfected beings on Earth closest to God, animals that share our two sexed nature are more advanced as well (DeVun 2014, 464). Mammals could be closer to us in terms of value, but still below man’s dominion. “Lower” life forms that diverge from binary sex entirely, such as fungus, plants, and invertebrates, are even lower. This division allowed a taxonomy of life to be created, situating man on top. Thomas Hobbes’ (and later John Locke’s social contract) divine order places men (white) in control over all beasts and “bestial” beings such as women and non-Europeans. Femininity’s connotation with nature made women closer to animals; something man has the right to rule. For non-European cultures with practices deemed “primitive,” the act of being more closely connected to the perceived “natural world” acted as another means to justify colonial exploitation just as a man was considered justified to control livestock. While the monstrous races no longer had chest faces or bat wings, the implication of non-European cultures having beast-like qualities and sexualities stayed. When culture places the marginalized in a position of being less than human, those beast-like qualities, or monster-like qualities, may become enticing as a way to take back power.



If a rigid social order between men and women, where men were powerful owners and women submissive objects, were to be maintained, then gender must never fluctuate. If it can, then these systems of power fall apart. This colors the interpretation of everything in our world as Nurka states:

...human time is too reliant on origin stories that seem destined to repeat endlessly a certain refrain of sexual difference, namely, of alpha males and passive females, of a natural and proper order of gender and sexuality. In the contemporary sociobiological model, human time is too dependent on the mechanics of reproduction to consider how sex and sexuality diverge from or complicate the reproductive imperative, and sociobiological perspectives too often rely on a rigid gender essentialism that reduces sexual diversity to a mindnumbing interaction between active males and passive females. (Nurka, 215)

Nurka reiterates the idea that binary sexual-social relations have been grafted onto everything. Interactions between non-human animals are viewed through the same lens, further reinforcing and interpreting male dominance as a naturalized phenomenon. If it is argued that these dynamics are biologically encoded, it therefore must be allowed to continue as it would be considered essential to human social behavior. By assuming these characteristics are necessary to human life, an assertion based primarily on human constructed systems, it ostracizes and pushes down everyone who doesn't fit, or doesn't want to fit, in this structure.

When the now clearly defined distinctions between sexes become blurred, monstrous images appear. The monster also carries a category crisis: something that cannot nicely fit into one state or another (Cohen, 6). As such, it is neither, and both,

human and animal, female and male, and it otherwise violates the expected nature of the world. It is unfortunately expected that gender variant people can become a target of monsterization. The contemporary transsexual, later transgender person, could only exist if it was accepted as an abnormal, deviant, monster.

By the mid 20th century, there were not only terms to describe trans existence but medical means to diagnose it. One of the most common terms associated with a transsexual<sup>7</sup> diagnosis is a “wrong-body,” or otherwise a mismatch between a Cartesian style body and mind. Caterina Nirta, researcher in trans studies as well as disobedience and deviance, summarizes the concept as:

First developed in the context of sexology, the ‘wrong-body’ emerges as a shorthand for describing trans experiences, understood as sites of conflict between an immaterial sense of self (identity) and the material body (sex, image) (Engdahl 2014) trapped in a wrongful corporeality that can only be rectified by surgery (Mason-Schrock 1996). (Nirta, 340)

Nirta is referencing a history of medical knowledge that considered transsexual people “born in the wrong body.” Assimilation and happiness could only occur after fully becoming the sex they should be through reconstructive surgery. To be considered a true transsexual, certain criteria needed to be met. For transsexual women, this included buying into heterosexuality as well as patriarchal ideals of womanhood. Doctors at clinics would interview prospective trans patients to determine if this was true, and as many trans women of the time deeply desired things like hormones and surgery, they filled the necessary criteria in order to get what they

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<sup>7</sup> While this terminology is not as popular today, for historical purposes I’ll be using it interchangeably with transgender and trans.

needed (Stone, 290-1). So, while studies claimed true transsexuals fit gender roles, and academics cried about upholding gender stereotypes, trans people merely did what they had to do to jump over medical hurdles.

By marking transsexuality, transgender identity, and gender dysphoria in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*<sup>8</sup>, transness becomes a problem that can be treated (American Psychiatric Association, 14). Diagnosis and treatments came not from a place of affirming the wide variety of trans experiences, but from a desire to normalize an abnormal individual. Trans historian and activist Susan Stryker plays with the association between the transgender body and the monster while writing on the history of trans surgery.

The agenda that produced hormonal and surgical sex reassignment techniques is no less pretentious, and no more noble, than Frankenstein's... Its genealogy emerges from a metaphysical quest older than modern science, and its cultural politics are aligned with a deeply conservative attempt to stabilize gendered identity in service of the naturalized heterosexual order... Transsexual embodiment, like the embodiment of the monster, places its subject in an unassimilable, antagonistic, queer relationship to a Nature in which it must nevertheless exist. (Stryker, 248)

Stryker is describing the dissonance between the possible freedoms in medical intervention, the regulation for what is appropriate, and the political landscape that makes medical transition possible. She compares her existence to Frankenstein's

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<sup>8</sup> *DSM*. The 5th edition comfortably nestles gender dysphoria in its own category after various sexual disorders, but that is a big upgrade compared to the *DSM IV*, which considered gender identity disorder a paraphilia listed next to things such as pedophilia.

monster, someone who cannot fully blend into cisheteronormative<sup>9</sup> society nor exist in an unmodified “natural” state, but must exist anyway. Being a disorder has its upsides such as legal medical pathways and insurance coverage that can reduce financial costs, however this rhetoric is harmful to trans people who may not ascribe to a “typical journey” towards an “opposite” gender. This can involve not being heterosexual, presenting in gender nonconforming ways, having or not having different aspects of hormonal and surgical interventions, as well as not wanting to be referred to as someone male or female at all.

Transgender “treatment” being possible within the medical industrial complex becomes a type of what trans studies authors Hil Malatino and Paul Preciado describe as a pharmacopornographic regime. The medical industry allows the commodification and extraction of sex/sexuality that turns identity into products; “Gender becomes literally encapsulated, as does arousal, sadness, content.” (Malatino, 187). Access to changing gender is made literal through regulated hormones with “only certain subjects able to actualize technologies of transition in fully legal, monitored ways” (187). Presenting fantasy futures of gender transformation through physical acts such as hormones and surgery cannot ignore the reality that it is a regulated, highly biased process. Under the guise of offering solutions, it still is the same oppressive structure that polices trans bodies. Uncritically allowing institutions and not trans people

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<sup>9</sup> The combination of “cisgender” meaning non-trans or aligned with assigned gender at birth and “heteronormative” meaning prioritizing heterosexual relationships and delegitimizing others. The combination puts an emphasis on the naturalization of both cisgender and heterosexual dynamics/ways of going about the world.

themselves to shape these structures leads to “a new kind of hot, psychotropic, punk capitalism” (Preciado, 33); a capitalism that insists there can be an answer to gender dysphoria woes in the form of product, ignoring trans support networks and DIY (Do it yourself) techniques while enforcing gendered body standards. Some DIY techniques include hormones outside of prescribed medications, hair removal, and surgery. One notable account of trans organized, DIY surgery is the story of orchiectomies performed by a trans woman named Eilís Ní Fhlannagáin and her girlfriend, Willow, in a rural, Washington state homestead (Short, 00:03:00).

If we explore alternatives to the wrong-body metaphor, it not only allows for greater possibilities within transformation, but also refutes pathologization. Doing so prioritizes what trans and feminist philosopher Talia Mae Bettcher calls “First Person Authority.” FPA relies on the phenomenological claim that an individual knows their lived experience more than any other, while still recognizing that human beings are fallible (Bettcher, 100). In this way, a trans person can be trusted to make a claim to their own embodiment that should not have to answer to diagnostic criteria. This becomes difficult, as trans people are seen as deceptive due to their perceived hiding of a biological reality as well as stretching the truth in order to access medical care.

Bettcher goes on to say:

...gender presentation literally signifies physical sex. If it is true that transpeople who “misalign” gender presentation with their sexed body are deceivers or pretenders, then those who “correctly” align their presentation with their body tell the truth. Thus, there is a representational relation between gender presentation and sexed body. (Bettcher, 105)

If an entire population can be written off as deceitful, it is easier to view them as predatory or malicious. The deviant mixed sex, over-sexed, and otherwise “abnormal” body of the 13th century is still alive and well. This poses a catch-22 for trans people who face judgment for seeming to deceive through similitude with their gender, but also judged for not “putting in an effort” to be seen as that gender. In this way, all transgender people are subjected to the same monsterifying lens no matter how much they may try to assimilate.

The monstrous, less than human stigma of gender and sexual crossings act to disenfranchise trans people, but it also is a metaphor reclaimed in trans art. Susan Stryker’s powerful monologue, and later essay about the subject matter, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix,” uses Frankenstein’s monster to articulate her profound feelings of transgender rage.

Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster’s as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist. (Stryker, 245)

Using Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as a prime comparison, Stryker relates to the feelings of loneliness and ostracization. She identifies with the constructed body made by a man that gives his creation a lesser than human status. Still, the creature persists, full of rage against his<sup>10</sup> creator, Dr. Victor Frankenstein, for abandoning him to a world that holds no love for him. The mixing and matching of various parts

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<sup>10</sup> The creature is referred to by he, him, his throughout the novel, however the creature never establishes a personal connection to gender. “He” is often used as a default singular pronoun in English.

becomes useful to Stryker as a helpful analogy to the process of transitioning, hormones, and surgery. She concludes the monologue by addressing the audience, stating that her trans body changed through unnatural means is no different than the tension lurking in peoples' hearts.

Hearken unto me, fellow creatures. I who have dwelt in a form unmatched with my desire, I whose flesh has become an assemblage of incongruous anatomical parts, I who achieve the similitude of a natural body only through an unnatural process, I offer you this warning: the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie. Do not trust it to protect you from what I represent, for it is a fabrication that cloaks the groundlessness of the privilege you seek to maintain for yourself at my expense. You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic Womb has birthed us both. I call upon you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine. I challenge you to risk abjection and flourish as well as have I. Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself. (247)

Stryker is calling upon the audience, those who may not consider themselves trans, to question the assumptions they have about their own bodies. If we consider another one of Cohen's arguments, that the monster polices the borders of the possible, then the transgender monster is a fear lurking within anyone, threatening cultural collapse if people/bodies are allowed to explore this monstrous realm (Cohen, 12). One becomes a monster if they "discover seams and sutures"(Stryker, 247) in themselves, and that is a frightening thought for many. Stryker wants more people to consider the facets of themselves they have been denied to explore, alluding to the promise of greater personal revelation and acceptance.

#### IV. The Allure of the Grotesque



**Fig. 4.1** Grotesque fresco by Cesare Baglione in Sala dei Paesaggi, Castello di Torrechiara, c. 1590. Accessed through Hansen (2017) and photo by Pernille Klemp.

Coming from the Italian word meaning grotto, grotesque is named after the artwork found in Italian caves during excavations in the 1500s. The grotesque became widely used as a decorative style notable for ambiguous, hybrid forms (Hansen, 4.1-.6). As seen in figure 4.1, animals, plants, and humanoids blend together evoking a strangeness previously seen in monstrous mixed-sex illustrations. The figures are turning, twisting, and distorting, becoming entirely new beings. Hansen goes on to draw a connection between the distortion of form and an implied perversion, both physically and as a form of deviancy (4.5). From this metamorphosis in grotesque art, I want to draw a connection to medical methods of gender transition.

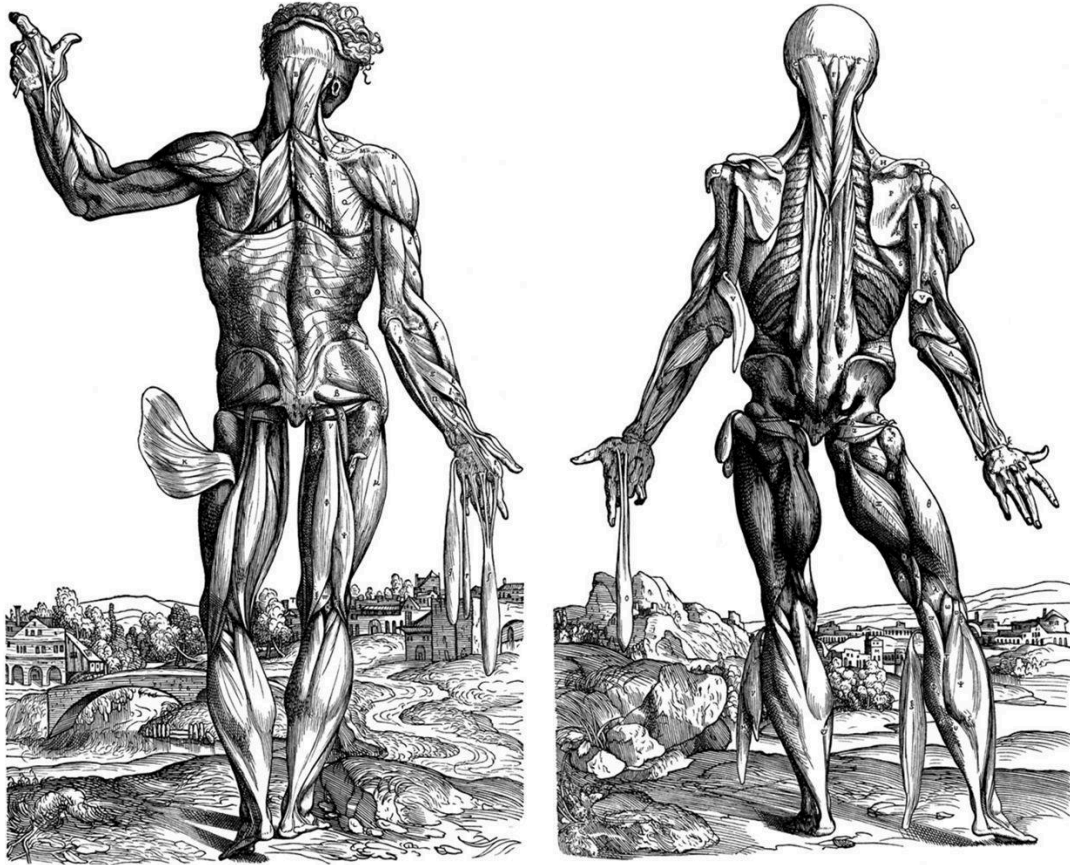
It's easy for people to see the process of transition, bodily change, as a grotesque one. That is, in fact, what deters many people from transitioning in the first place: feeling fearful for what could possibly, permanently, go wrong. If transgender people have been given massive, monstrous baggage, then how do I expect to flip that



around with body horror phantoms and sexy skeletons? Once again, let's think about monstrous boundary crossing, but this time not of gender but of skin.

Skin houses the body, and it is figured in Gothic as the ultimate boundary, the material that divides the inside from the outside...Slowly but surely the outside becomes the inside, and the hide no longer conceals or contains; it offers itself up as text, as body, as monster.” (Halberstam, 153)

Gothic and gender studies scholar Jack Halberstam uses the example of skin itself as a marker of monstrosity in his book *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Skin that is too much or too little of one thing or another (decomposed, stretched, loose, color, translucency) becomes a place for horror. Part of what makes body horror so compelling in the first place is its immediacy. It tells the viewer “what if this happened to you?” and from there the show begins. Skin is a container with everything else sloshing around inside. It protects us literally, but also psychologically from seeing the horror within all of us. It is also something that acts to distinguish ourselves from one another marking the end of one person and the beginning of another. Once that is disrupted, every body becomes a site for horror.

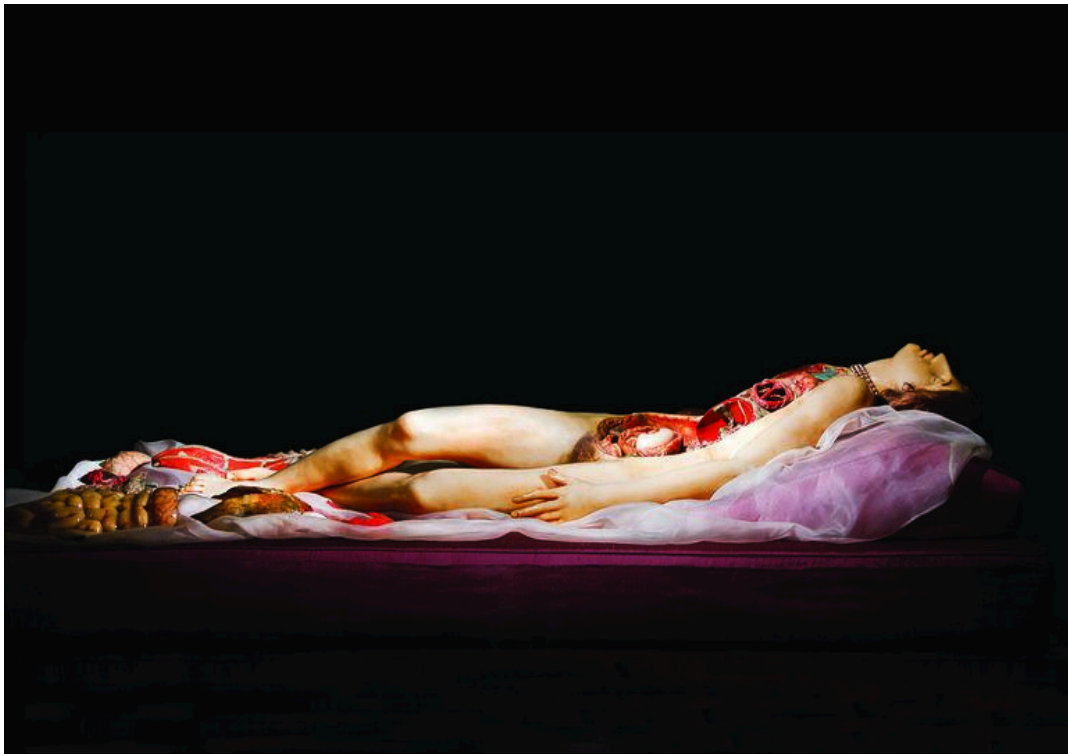


**Fig. 4.2 and Fig. 4.3** Beautiful flayed forms by Vesalius, *Decima musculorum tabula* and *Duodecima musculorum tabula*, 1543, woodcut. Part of Vesalius anatomical illustrations courtesy of Northwestern University.

The works by Italian illustrator Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564) toe the line between beautiful and horrific. Figures stand in tasteful contrapposto<sup>11</sup> with a graceful lightness to their bodies in contrast to their flayed flesh. Anatomical Venuses sought to educate about anatomy while in the uncanny wax form of Ophelia-like, beautiful women, often in stages of childbirth or pregnancy as seen in figure 4.4.

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<sup>11</sup> A classical composition term referring to a human figure placing weight on one foot and relaxing the opposite side to create a rhythm or flow through a sculpture or drawing.



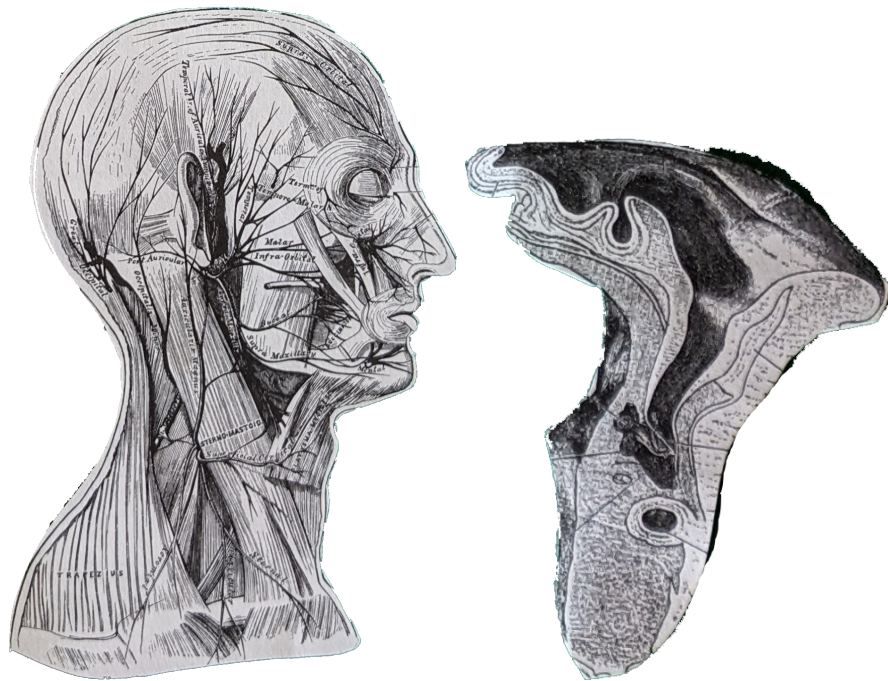
**Fig. 4.4** Splayed open body of *Venerina* (Little Venus), 1782, created by the workshop of Clemente Susini, Courtesy of Museo di Palazzo Poggi - Università di Bologna. Photo by Joanna Ebenstein.

These artworks were used as educational tools, with their cadaver sources seen as monsters themselves. As anthropologist and medical history researcher Rachel Prentice states, “...the cadaver is never ontologically stable: it is always person and thing” (Prentice, 59). The crossed boundaries of living and dead make their allure akin to Cohen’s forbidden, monstrous desires (Cohen, 17). Like clothing stripped away, these sensual anatomical models depict a hidden, secret intimacy. In *Gray’s Anatomy*, instead of one beautiful composition of peeled back layers, the body is broken up into many discrete categories drawn independent of each other.

Reminiscent of their era, Henry Vandyke Carter's illustrations seek an objective understanding of the human body through a "non-style" as art historian Martin Kemp states:

The avoidance of any appealing views of the whole body – even the depiction of a complete skeleton – and his [Gray's] functional setting of the illustrations of the detailed parts of the body within the pages of printed text consistently negate any tendency to think that we are dealing with the 'arty' production of a picture book. There is little modelling in light and shade, no attempt to place figures in graceful poses, and no evocative backgrounds. (Kemp, 205)

This puts them in stark contrast to the purposefully beautiful forms of Vesalius and the Anatomical Venus.



**Fig. 4.5 and 4.6** Cutouts of the musculature and blood vessels of the human head and a cross section of the ear from *Gray's Anatomy*, 1974 Running Press edition.

The development in the 19th century of being able to effectively freeze and slice cadavers to render layers of the body led to an illustrative style that emphasized photographic practicality rather than aesthetic beauty<sup>12</sup>; however this “non-style” became iconic in its own right (Kemp, 205-6). While these ill-begotten cadavers, highlighted through the history of grave robbing (Ponce, 344)<sup>13</sup>, were used to enforce a default human body, I have subverted their origins to create beautiful, grotesque monsters.

I draw a parallel between these anatomical models and older grotesques as both contain a disturbance of the familiar human form. Literary scholar and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin interrogates the imagery present in grotesque literature noting how body parts become the focus for the grotesque, especially features of the face, the digestive system, and extensions of the body beyond its assumed natural boundary (Bakhtin, 316-7). The transgression of the so-called natural state of the body through dissection and surgery mirrors the interplay of the internal and external world present in grotesque images such as eating, drinking, and giving birth (317).

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<sup>12</sup> The classical framing of Vesalius’ artwork can be seen as glorifying the human body as seen in prior discussions on man’s relation to God in contrast to organisms that stray from humanity’s biological and sexual resemblance.

<sup>13</sup> It was frowned upon to dissect human bodies in Europe and the United States well into the 19th and 20th centuries due to religious and community concerns over bodies being respected. With increasing demand for cadavers and no state controlled means to acquire them, grave robbing was common. Targets were the poor, slaves, criminals, and unclaimed bodies. Medical science held a tenuous relationship with the public about dissection until the mid 20th century. Cadaver dissection is still a necessary part of medical research that can be done compassionately towards the body and known living relations. See Ponce, “They Increase in Beauty and Elegance.”



**Fig. 4.7** The human figure being turned inside out, engulfing other humans, and morphing into plant-like matter in this detail by Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1510-1515, Madrid, Museo del Prado

The dense detail in grotesque artwork is very similar to anatomical illustrations. Both take familiar forms and heighten them with previously unseen patterns or new fantastical shapes such as new silhouettes of the human body as cavities are opened or splayed apart during surgery.

The rupture of the internal/external skin layer is essential to the radical possibilities that surgery offers. Trans and sexuality studies author Eva Hayward elaborates on how, for trans people, the initially horrifying idea of surgically altering the body can be self actualizing.

The cut is possibility. For some transsexual women, the cut is not so much an opening of the body, but a generative effort to pull the body back through itself in order to feel mending, to feel the growth of new margins...Between the surgeon's efforts and my body's biomechanics... boundaries redrawn... my tissues are mutable in so far as they are made of me and propel me to imagine an embodied elsewhere... We create embodiment by not jumping out of our bodies, but by taking up a fold in our bodies, by folding (or cutting) ourselves, and creating a transformative scar of ourselves. (Hayward, 255-6)

The imagery of surgery, while being an emotional experience, is not necessarily that of horror, but offers possibilities for new growth in the body and the physical reality of healing, morphing skin. It is impossible to escape the body<sup>14</sup>, so transformation allows a human being to take new meaning within their body, exerting self expression and autonomy. Hayward emphasizes that this is not a destructive process, rather it is something that can hold remarkable beauty even within the immediate shocking impact of blood, scabbing, ooze, and overwhelming smells. It is the realization that the body is "...pliant to a point, flexible within limits, constrained by language, articulation, flesh, history and bone" (Hayward, 257). There are limits<sup>15</sup> within the transformative properties of bodies. For some trans people, this may create ongoing dysphoric dread, perpetually waiting for "better advancements" in medicine.

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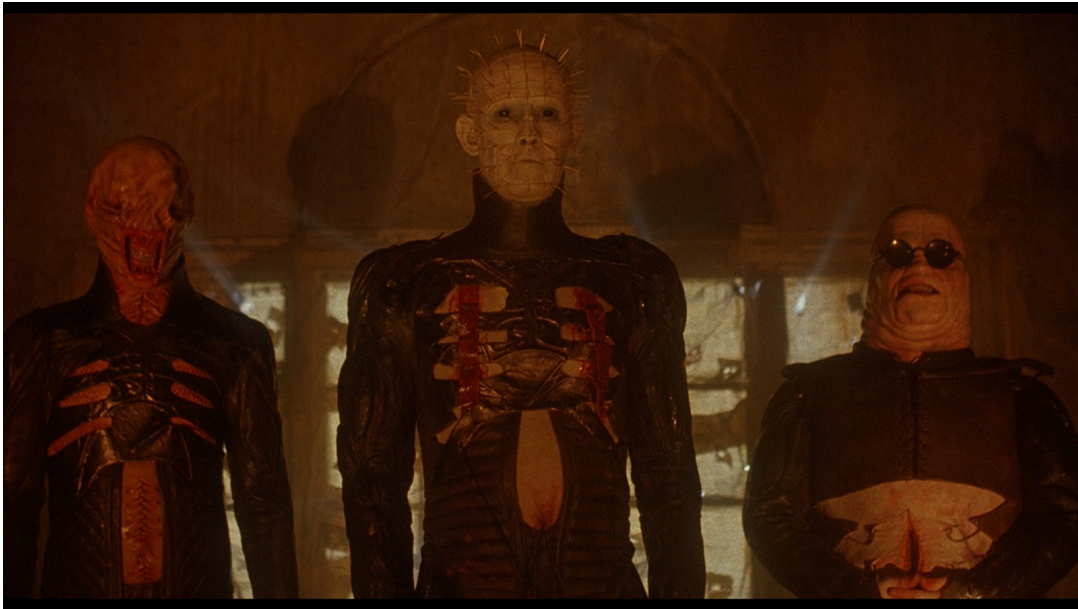
<sup>14</sup> Except through death, I suppose.

<sup>15</sup> For now...

At the intersection of intricate anatomical illustrations, trans monstrosity, and surgical empowerment lies the crux of my want to create a new kind of monster. In an effort to subvert the trend of transphobic individuals on the internet sharing in-process surgery photos, often without the patient's consent, to imply trans surgery is an abomination, I used my own surgical experiences to investigate my fascination with these seemingly incompatible emotions: euphoria and horror.

I had radial forearm flap phalloplasty (RFF phalloplasty) in August of 2023. When the flap itself, composed of the epidermal skin layer as well as subcutaneous fat, nerves, and blood vessels, was formed to become my penis, there was a split-thickness skin graft placed on top of the bare muscles and tendons of my arm. Between the skin from my thigh and my arm muscles, my surgeon placed a layer of material called Integra which is a brand of animal, usually cow or pig, collagen wound matrix. This foreign scaffolding bridged the gap between my exposed tendons and muscle with a rectangle of my own skin. Without any fat, I could see the actuation of my muscles and tendons much more clearly. I couldn't help but think about the cenobites from Clive Barker's *Hellraiser* (1987).





**Fig 4.8** Three of the cenobites from *Hellraiser*, 1987, directed by Clive Barker .  
1:14:20

Their skinless, mutilated bodies, in deathless, pleasurable agony are accentuated by hanging flaps of skin and mechanical implants. Like the cenobite, I too felt gratification from this marker of self actualization. Like the anatomical and grotesque artworks discussed above and the modern camp of the cenobite, trans surgical interventions engage with both the exterior and interior of skin.

## V. Making Trans Games

Now that we have an understanding of how trans experiences can be related to the monstrous, and why I have found it important to utilize body horror, I explore why it was necessary to use a video game to tell a trans story. Video games, and games more generally, are at their core an embodied medium. Players become the persona of a character or personally engage with a ritual instead of only observing. Games are able to give and take away control, allowing certain actions while refusing others. Offering the ability to play with alternative possibilities opens ways for designers to share their experiences in innovative ways. Bo Ruberg, a games studies scholar with an emphasis on queer games, describes how the architecture of games overlaps with living as a trans person stating, "...digital tools, including video games, are at the heart of many elements of contemporary transgender experience" (Ruberg, 203). Transgender people may be perceived through a set of predefined "variables," unalterable without "hacking" the "source code." The binary nature of computer vision enforces boxes, making trans stories in games similar to the real world: fighting against a seemingly unalterable order. Player determined actions and choices can mirror the self autonomy at the core of trans life.

Ruberg defines the intersection between critical thought and game design from a trans perspective as trans game studies. It aims to elevate the intellectual contributions by trans game designers that shape conversations around trans stories in

media (Ruberg, 2014). Trans games take a practice based, hands on approach to explore complex themes in trans studies. Through design choices and unique systems, trans games can effectively communicate with players in ways that academic writing alone cannot. Game designer Anna Anthropy describes in her book *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, "... games, digital and otherwise, transmit ideas and culture... a game conveys what it's like to experience the subject as a system of rules" (Anthropy, 3). When trans people take proliferated game development technologies to make their own games, trans experiences can now be expressed through a system of rules similar to the social rules that police gendered behavior. Accessible game engines are enticing to many trans game designers that may have less experience in professional game design fields, allowing for more people, and therefore more stories and perspectives, to make games.

Many use *itch.io* to distribute their games, books, comics, writing, and anything else that can either be free to download or paid with developers determining their own prices. Unlike other game distributors like *Steam* that take a large cut of sales, *itch.io* has sliding options allowing developers to take home 100% of their revenue. The trend towards congregating in self published spaces is fueled partly due to their accessibility, but also for the willingness of sites like *itch.io* to not limit nor define what a game can be. This makes many artworks published on *itch.io* subversive, pushing boundaries and limitations of traditional game design that echoes the ways trans people push acceptable gender boundaries.

In the game *Sorry, We Have a Policy* by Cailin Grace Brown and Shanna Lowrie-Maxwell, trans experiences are articulated through the rules surrounding scheduling doctors appointments. In this 2D game, the player is standing in a queue and must press the correct button when prompted to continue to walk forward in line. During this process, the player can open the paper and do a word search puzzle, see the front page of the sometimes very transphobic news, look at a phone, or try to set up an appointment with a private provider.

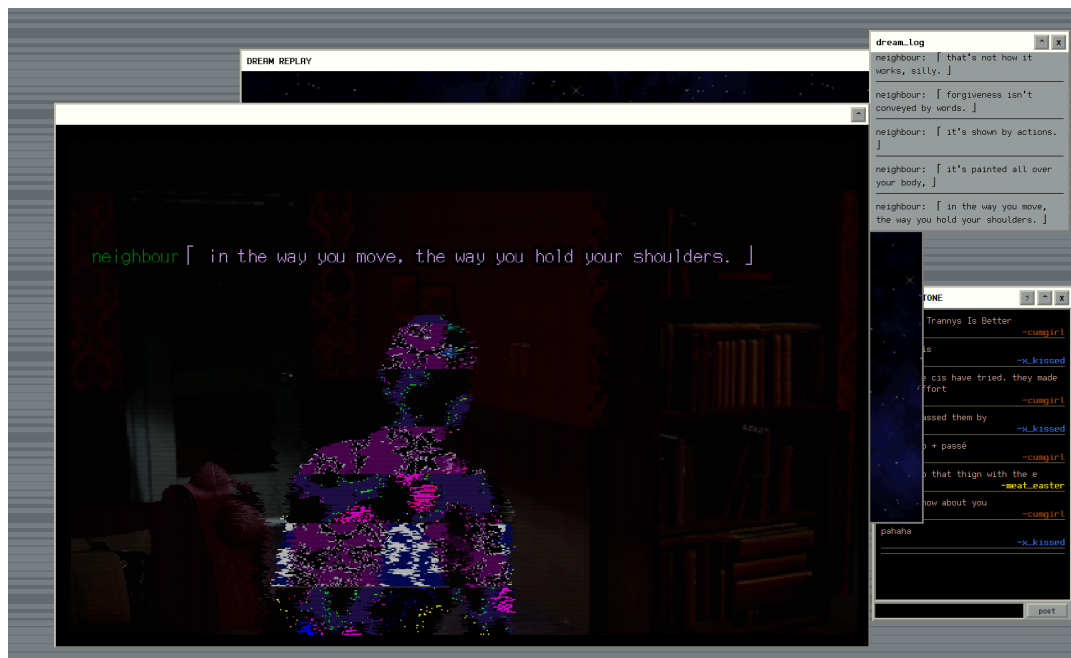


**Fig. 5.1** Screenshot of the main waiting room at the beginning of [Sorry, We Have a Policy](#), 2022, published by the Unseele Collective

The player balances tasks or may fall behind in line. Once in the office, various health providers tell the player why they are not able to continue the appointment, ignore what the player tries to tell them, and send the player to the back of the line to fulfill additional requirements (hence the name “Sorry, we have a policy”). As the game

continues, characters standing in line begin to keel over and collapse onto the floor, presumably dead. It's a frustrating, time consuming game that uses each mechanic to evoke the feeling of futility working with the medical system and mourn those who don't make it long enough to get through the queue. An additional note is that there are two downloadable versions of the game: one with a feminine avatar, evoking the trans women who developed the game, and one with a masculine avatar, made due to the popular request of trans men/masculine players. This game was made within the context of the British National Health Service (NHS) and the current massive wait times for trans healthcare. In *Sorry, We Have a Policy*, the frustration of medical systems are felt, experienced, and endured, unable to progress without the player's energy and focus.

Many trans game makers also play with formative genre in order to highlight the disjointed, hybrid, and internalized monstrosity that pervades trans life. In the game *TRAUMAKT~4.SEXE* by Freya Campbell and Jazz Mickle, the player character, a transgender woman named Zoe, uses a futuristic technology to watch recordings of her dreams on her computer.



**Fig 5.2** Screenshot of Zoe's computer in [TRAUMAKT~4.SEXE](#), 2023

She pines for her neighbor, acts as a nude model for her emotionally distant girlfriend, and confides in her close, occult friend Colet who is a transgender man. The gameplay fluctuates between navigating a late 90s to early 2000s style computer desktop, wandering around her apartment complex, and visual novel<sup>16</sup>-like conversations. Zoe wants to fulfill her desires while at the same time feeling ashamed of them. Her sexuality is shaped by the discomfort towards aspects of her body and her unconventional sexual interests<sup>17</sup> making her experiences very resonant with

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<sup>16</sup> A genre of video game that consists primarily of conversation between characters conveyed through a dialogue box where the player can click (or otherwise interact) to progress the text. Visual novels are a subgenre of interactive fiction, one that includes the key feature of visuals that accompany the text such as character art, backgrounds, or objects.

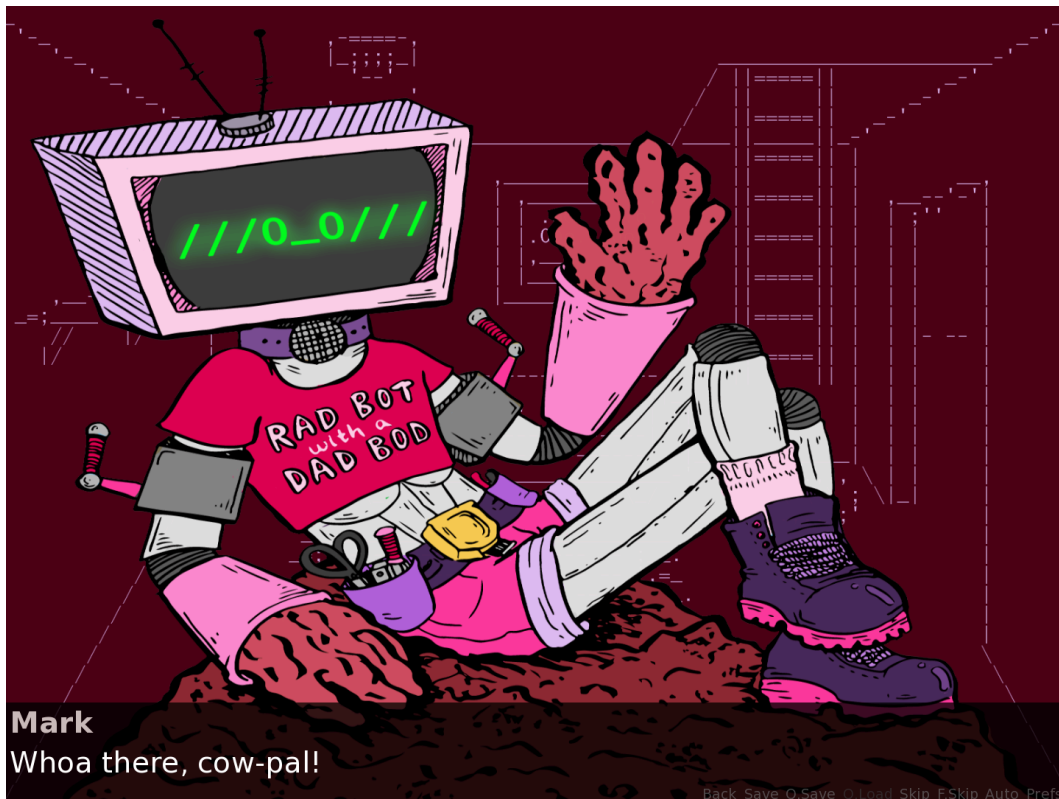
<sup>17</sup> In Zoe's case, being a voyeur and desiring to be submissive to a dominant woman in a BDSM context.

many trans people's. Unsettling dream sequences, often cutting to turn-based combat or 3D environments without warning, act as places to explore her desires. Zoe also talks to her friends online through a chat room reminiscent of AOL<sup>18</sup>. This evokes the way many trans people connect with each other via the Internet in lieu of having access to dedicated, real life social spaces. The hilarious conversations full of text slang are juxtaposed with the intense, erotic and violent scenes that bookend them. *TRAUMAKT~4.SEXE* blends together horror, comedy, and romance while breaking traditional game formats that stick to one perspective such as top-down 2D or first person 3D. This technical blending is another example of Ruberg's claim that trans people are transing games themselves, by transforming the medium as we know it (Ruberg, 205).

Games can be a powerful tool for self discovery and can transplant players into entirely different beings. The games *GENDERWRECKED* by Ryan Rose Aceae and Heather Robertson as well as *Sabbat: Director's Kvt* by Eva "sleemey heemey" Problems both make monstrous bodies desirable genders and forms. In *GENDERWRECKED*, a visual novel in a far future, post-gender world, characters lack traditional human gender signifiers such as breasts, body hair, vocal pitch, or for many characters even clothing. Their actual gender is not explained outside of pronouns or nebulous concepts such as "meat boys" or "flickering neon signs." What does pronoun difference mean in a post-human narrative like this one?

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<sup>18</sup> America Online, an Internet based messaging service as well as Internet provider company popular in the 1980s and 1990s.



**Fig. 5.3** Screenshot of Mark the local meat dad in [GENDERWRECKED](#), 2017

Characters have traits of dinosaurs, dragons, swamp-things, flaming orbs, wolves, and robots to name a few. They have equally genuine and humorous relationships to their genders, echoing the common trans experience of finding it difficult to define gender itself. On the player's quest to "discover gender," it's ultimately revealed that there are countless ways to understand gender that are different for anyone. *Sabbat* takes monstrous gender in a different direction: by transforming from a prior state through a Satanic ritual.





**Fig. 5.4** Examples of possible bodies illustrated by Witnessheabsurd from [Sabbat: Director's Kvt](#), 2020

This interactive fiction game is made in the game engine Twine with limited visuals outside of a character sprite in the corner that represents the player's new form. The player is asked to sacrifice various animals for a ritual, smearing blood on different

parts of their body. Each part of the player's body morphs into a demonic form inspired by the chosen animals. While the text describing the transformation process and the sprites are horrifying, the actual description of the player character's relationship with their new body is that of adoration. The amount of variance possible, seen in the small sampling of figures 5.4, 5.5, 5.6 and 5.7, allows for each character to feel unique and influence dialogue such as describing the player as reptilian, slimy, feathered etc. By marrying the horrifying physique of the player with self indulgent fantasies as you sleep with a local witch and destroy the city, *Sabbat* successfully simulates how becoming the monster can be a beautiful ideal.

## VI. Formal Description of A Night for Flesh and Roses

Drawing upon the history of monstrosity, grotesque horror, and trans game design, my video game uses *Gray's Anatomy* illustrations to visually parallel transgender surgery shock images<sup>19</sup>. Filled with Stryker's transgender rage, I decided to reclaim the horror associated with surgery and show how I desire this body no matter how monstrous others may consider it.

*A Night for Flesh and Roses* was constructed over several different mediums and is still growing. It is, primarily, a video game in the form of a visual novel made in the Ren'Py<sup>20</sup> game engine. Players use the mouse to click through dialogue, explore and interact with the 2D environment, and create a character with draggable body piece components. The installation that opened on April 26th 2024 acts as a larger, immersive environment to house the game. In addition to presenting the video game, there is a crafting table for participant-made collages and a pseudo lounge area inviting people to stay for longer periods of time. My installation engages with the neighboring piece *Facades of Ingress*<sup>21</sup>, both of which involve heavy player interaction.

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<sup>19</sup> A type of image shared online, often going viral on social media platforms or forums, that has the intention to disgust, horrify, or harass the viewer with usually the intention of "trolling" someone to shut down arguments. Many popular shock images include bizarre pornographic images/videos or gore either through bodily injury or, for my focus, surgery.

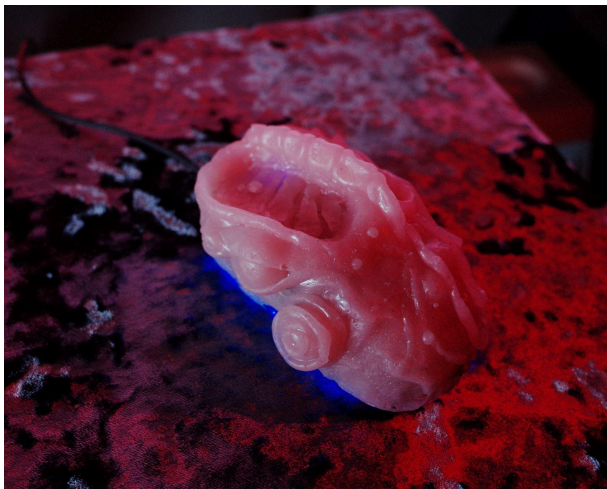
<sup>20</sup> A popular visual novel engine coded in Python.

<sup>21</sup> See page 64 for more information on this piece



**Fig. 6.1 and 6.2** Entryway to the installation and a guest playing with the character creator. The main room is approximately 10' x 10' with a peaked ceiling going up to 8' tall and an entryway that is 6'2" which is lower than a typical door frame.

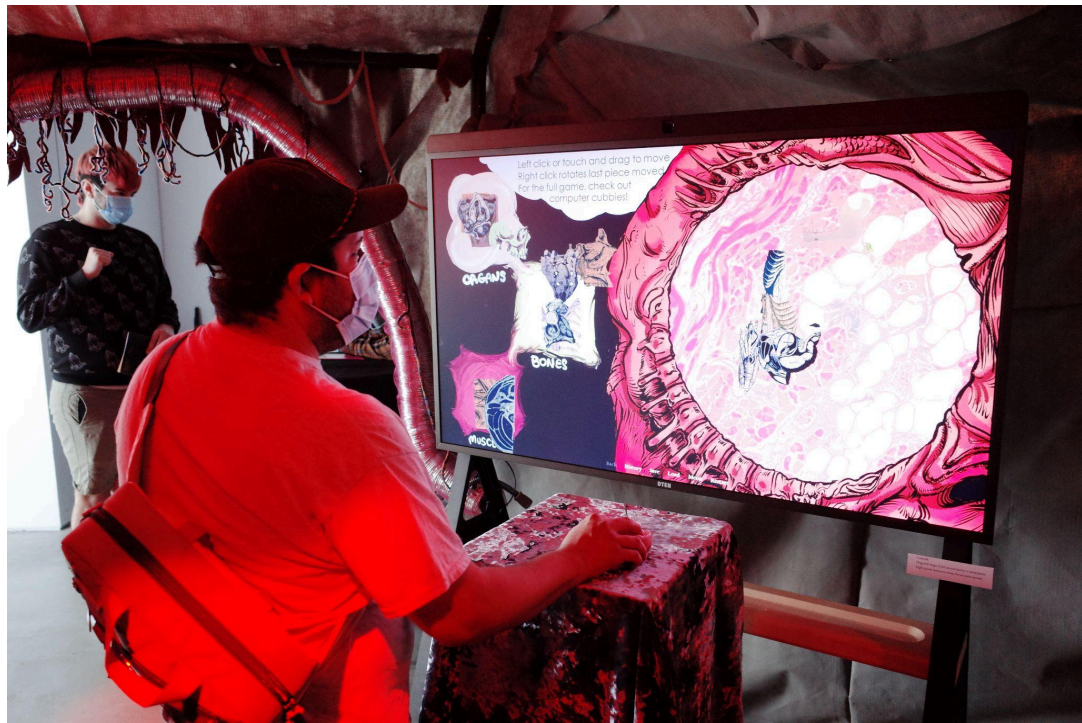
The cavern started as a humble carport but evolved into a network of winding, intestine-like chambers. Resembling collages present throughout the game, various materials such as yarn, latex, silicone, shredded fabric, and metal mix together to form and decorate surfaces. Weed prevention fabric allows just enough light to bleed through evoking porous membranes. Disks of hand poured, pigmented latex are embedded into various surfaces acting as windows into other spaces or as glowing panels for illumination. Visitors first see a decaying, glowing red circle of latex in the



**Fig. 6.3** One of the three silicone, fleshy mouse covers in the installation.

ceiling (seen in figures 6.1 and 6.2) projecting a dappled red pattern onto the concrete floor. Growing across the walls are multicolored crocheted tendrils that dangle in archways and resemble a combination of nerves,veins, arteries, and vines. Openings and passages occasionally dip low

enough forcing visitors to duck down in order to progress as seen in figure 6.10. The entryway features a monitor for guests to play with the character creator. Across from this monitor are two sofa chairs to let people take in the environment or observe other players touch the infamous “flesh mouse” (figure 6.3). Clicking to rotate body parts produces meaty, squishy, and crunching sounds that break the silence.



**Fig. 6.4 and 6.5** Entryway with a large monitor running the character creation part of the game in isolation priming visitors before they enter the true flesh dimension.



**Fig. 6.6** Lounge to observe the flesh festivities with a view of my original puppets in the upper right corner.

Deeper in the catacombs is a round table adorned with a dark gray, crushed velvet tablecloth reflecting magenta light (figure 6.8). To the left are two latex disks, tattered and creating windows into *Facades of Ingress* for participants to interact with one another. In addition, the ceiling has a large, multicolor, patchwork blob of latex and silicone acting as a projection screen for the stop motion character animations.



**Fig. 6.7** Stitched latex-silicone panel with stop motion animation projections.

Around this room are felt hexagons, some blank and others covered in collages of paper organs. The table has a tray of hand cut illustrations from multiple copies of *Gray's Anatomy* as well as others that are printed and machine cut on multicolored paper.



There is a message hanging from red yarn above the table reading:

Imagine you have entered a realm where bodies are no longer bound to the confines of medical taxonomies and physics inventing a new form of biology. Each piece was illustrated by English anatomist Henry Vandyke Carter in the mid 1800s while referencing human cadavers, but you will give them new life.

Create a character, your body, or something else out of the pieces provided. Take one of the hexagonal felt plates and use that as your canvas. To keep pieces in place, use the sewing pins in the middle of the table. Be careful! They're sharp. Don't get too carried away and jab the pins through to the other side.

Once you're done, you can either take your creation home with you, or if that isn't your idea of tasteful decor, you can hang it on one of the hooks in the room suspended by red yarn.



**Fig. 6.8** Participants creating collages. By the end of the exhibition, approximately 40 participant made artworks were on display.



**Fig. 6.9** Interior in one of the two computer cubbies equipped with a keyboard, mouse, and headphones. The headphones and hidden spaces allow for more intimate play experiences.

*A Night for Flesh and Roses* is set in a far future world where co-opted body engineering technologies are being used by renegade, eccentric individuals to morph their bodies inside out into surreal, monstrous forms. The player visits a strange structure, called the Crucible, with the hope of constructing a different body and mingling with strange people. The player can change their physical appearance at any time influencing how the world is navigated. Dialogue sequences with meaty, paper puppets are broken up by exploring this other world.



**Fig. 6.10** View from the farthest corner of the installation next to one of the two private computer areas. The series of archways create sightlines towards the main room but provide privacy. Passages range in height between 8' and 5'.

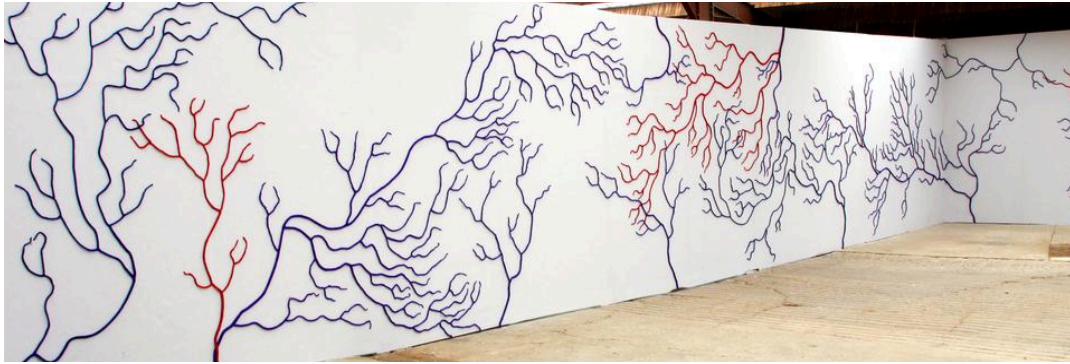


**Fig. 6.11** and **6.12** Screenshots the Crucible entryway and the library while speaking with The Experiment. Each character has a unique voice that whispers through headphones. The game was playable in person, but is also available to download<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> <https://necropocene.itch.io/a-night-for-flesh-and-roses> see supplemental files if itch.io has crashed and burned by the time you are reading this. If you live in a world without Windows, Mac, or Linux emulation, then maybe you can stitch my game back together from the source code.

## VII. Critique and Analysis

At every turn both in the physical installation and game, collage blurs the lines between various objects and materials allowing it to illustrate trans experiences such as surgery. Just as surgery cuts and rearranges preexisting material into something different, the physical and digital environments graft together lifeless substances to create a whole, living structure. The physical and digital spaces are curved and strange to feel more like a cave or body than buildings. The space invites players into a strange interior similar to Bakhtin's description of the grotesque body as going "... into the body's depths. Mountains and abysses... towers and subterranean passages" (Bakhtin, 318). The passageways reminiscent of cave tunnels are asymmetrical and of varying heights to feel as though it is a body that has been modified for a new purpose. The porous canopy became an analogy to skin and the fuzzy, crocheted veins carried nutrients across it. Latex and fabric are grotesquely intertwined like the body and the clothing that adorns it. It is a fleshy body of architecture made through unnatural processes (Stryker, 247). I was influenced by Ben Cuevas' artwork *Knit Veins* (figure 7.1) that turns a sterile gallery wall into a vascular system. Similarly, I transformed the relatively plain gray fabric surfaces of my installation into something that felt alive. Veins connected and sprawled from fleshy disks and the rear projected light gave the illusion that life flowed through the walls.

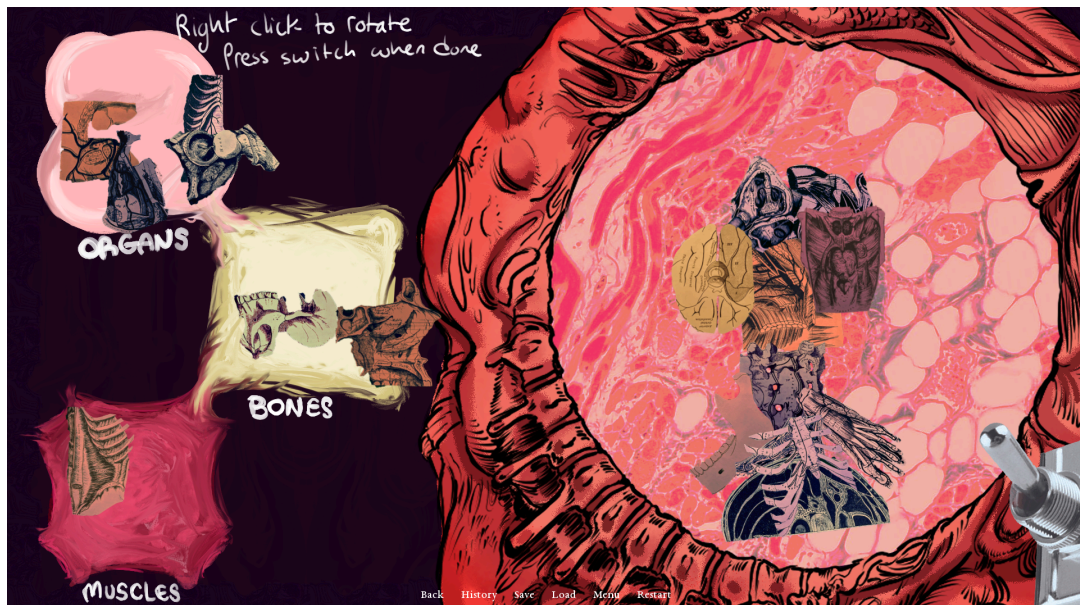
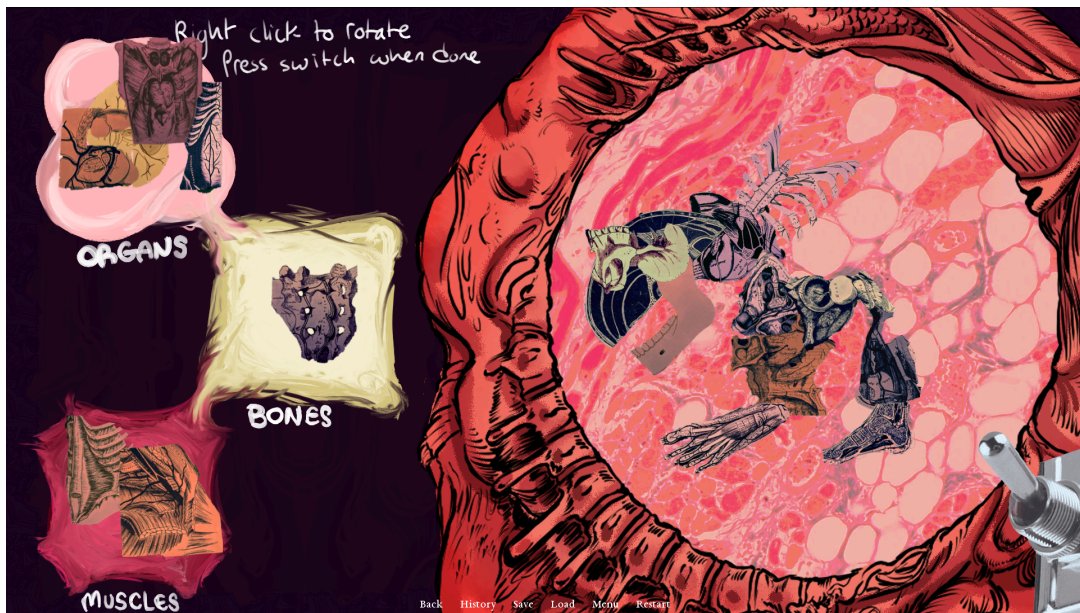


**Fig. 7.1** Ben Cuevas, *Knit Veins*, 2013, wool and silk, 40' x 13'

An important consideration for the space was having interaction at every encounter to reduce the feeling of a queue waiting to play the digital game. It allowed visitors who were not comfortable spending a substantial amount of time in the installation a chance to engage in short bursts. The analogue craft table became essential with its low barrier to entry. Participants engaged with ideas of deconstructing the default body and crafting their own even if they were uncomfortable playing video games. The layout of the space, with strange corridors, allows for navigation itself to become an opportunity for play. Visitors weaved through in different directions, moving in ways they rarely have the opportunity to in typical architecture. Just as Italian scholars and artists in the 1500s studied frescoes in ancient grottos, contorting themselves to fit through narrow passages (Hansen, 4.6), visitors to my installation became serpentine grotesques themselves as they bended, ducked, and traversed the cavern. This subverted expectations for what a comfortable home interior – implied through the table, lamps, and sofa chairs – and by extension a comfortable body, could be, asking visitors to rest within something strange. By

creating an architecture that meanders through interiors and exteriors, digital and physical space, it disrupts the normative heterosexual, cisgender, suburban family home. The physical environment becomes a bizarre space home to a collective of gender amorphous beings in various strange relationships with one another.

Alongside making an anatomical, trans-ified architecture, I envisioned the subversive possibilities of dress up games. Dress up games refer to a genre of primarily Web based games that exclusively consist of putting articles of clothing on, and otherwise customizing, a digital avatar. It is the digital equivalent to the long history of paper dolls. Older styles of this genre have draggable, non-snapping clothing elements as opposed to sticking to a set grid. Most subjects of dress up games are like models with tall, thin bodies and doll-like faces. Many of these games are marketed towards girls and feature fashion models or princesses as the subject matter. It becomes a vehicle to reinforce the connotation between femininity, material accessories, and beauty. Newer dress up games found on popular websites like *Doll Divine* and *Dress up Games* have a greater variety of body types, customization, and non-human characters such as cats and fantasy humanoids like mermaids or elves. *A Night for Flesh and Roses* utilizes the drag and drop style of a dress up game to create not a pretty human woman, but a horrifying assemblage of body parts.



*Your body seems to be soft and pliable, a glistening sheen.*

**Fig. 7.2, 7.3 and 7.4** Screenshots illustrating possible bodies, the different types of flesh, as well as the player's body being described as "soft and pliable" due to utilizing over three organ pieces.

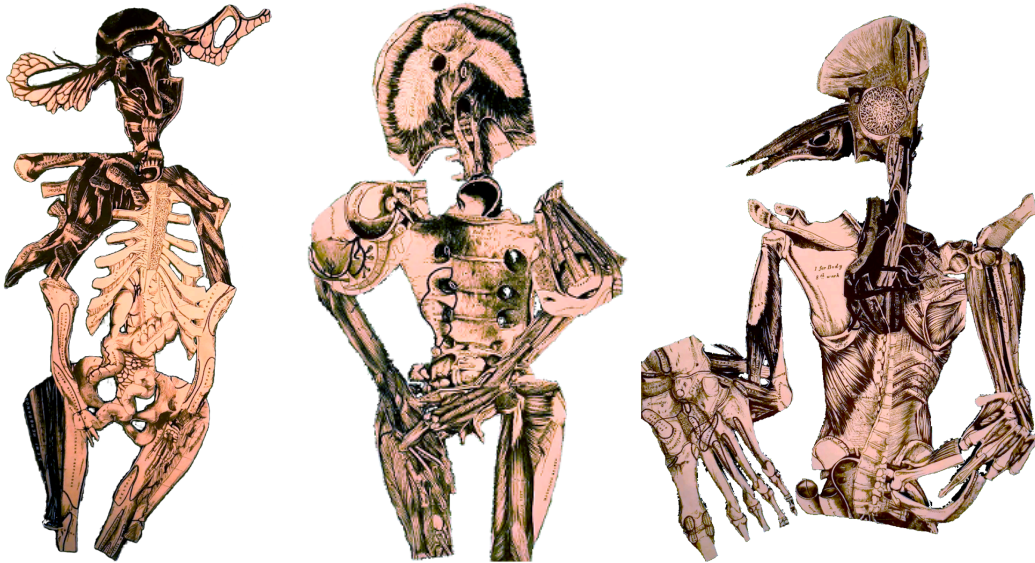


In my constructed world, I allow players to produce a type of monster meaningful to my personal, transgender subjectivity: a strange, fleshy thing of changing parts and warping flesh. Instead of being given a body to transition “away from,” the player builds and, as Hayward describes, “folds inward” into a new being (Hayward, 256). This subverts the gendered assumptions when customizing an avatar, while still implementing the delightful aspects of these mechanics. The body, even its gross interiors, is a source of fascination. Without a win condition, players are able to rearrange themselves to their own tastes, within the limits of possible body parts, that mirrors gender transition.



**Fig. 7.5** Screenshot of a “free response” encounter. The Host asks the player how their new form makes them feel. While this text is never used mechanically, it acts as a ritual for a player to engage in and reflect on what they have made digitally.

*A Night for Flesh and Roses* engages with many themes present in other games with trans developers. The player isn't what would be considered normal, but all the other characters do not desire to be normal either.



**Fig. 7.6** From left to right, The Mesmer, The Experiment, and The Reveler.

Like in *GENDERWRECKED* and *Sabbat*, my characters express themselves in ways beyond all current definitions of human, yet they are incredibly human, three dimensional<sup>23</sup> beings. Similar to the Oankali<sup>24</sup> of Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood* trilogy, my characters are familiar enough through identifiable shoulders and heads. However, they are unsettling through their human pieces yet inhuman appearance. Just like Lilith, once the fear subsides, once the player realizes this is their world now, there can be room for desire in what previously may have been disgust.

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<sup>23</sup> Though they are made of paper.

<sup>24</sup> Three sexed aliens with sensory tentacles covering their humanoid bodies.



**Fig. 7.7 and 7.8** Screenshots of the Host's flirtations telling the player they would be a fun plaything and would be interested in polishing the player's bones.

Visual novels, like *A Night for Flesh and Roses* and *GENDERWRECKED*, are commonly associated with the romance genre. Often the player is trying to court various attractive characters by giving them gifts or doing what they like. This gamifies attraction. Relationships in my game subvert who is expected to be a love interest and what they might look like. Characters are not seen as attractive by conventional means, instead their allure comes from their confidence to exist as themselves as well as reframing their monstrous bodies as attractive in their own way through evocative, descriptive dialogue<sup>25</sup>. There are no gifts nor statuses that indicate a character's attraction to the player, eliminating the omniscient perspective. In fact, if a player tries to appeal to a particular character, The Champion, who enjoys muscular features, while swapping in more muscular pieces mid conversation, The Champion will interrupt the player, saying that it's "... pretty pathetic of you..." that the player decided to "pander" to them (figures 7.9 and 7.10).

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<sup>25</sup> See Appendix: Select code excerpts, for more specific examples.

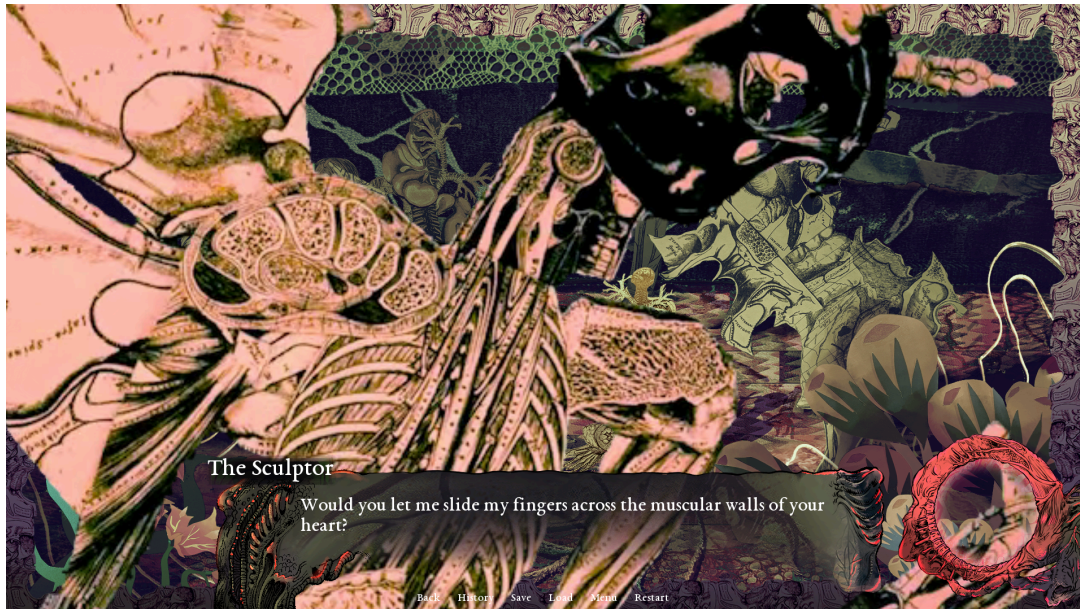


**Fig. 7.9 and 7.10** Screenshots right before The Champion calls the player pathetic.

Intimate encounters were written while considering the multiple kinds of bodies players could build, often drawing upon variables associated with particular parts. This can be seen in a scene between the player and The Sculptor if the player has

used jaw pieces. The narrator says, “Each tooth in your transmogrified jaw is traced delicately. Some are sharp and cut into the delicate fingers of the stranger.”

Because of both the player and other character’s strange anatomies, erotic moments are unconventional and draw inspiration from non-normative queer and t4t<sup>26</sup> intimacy.



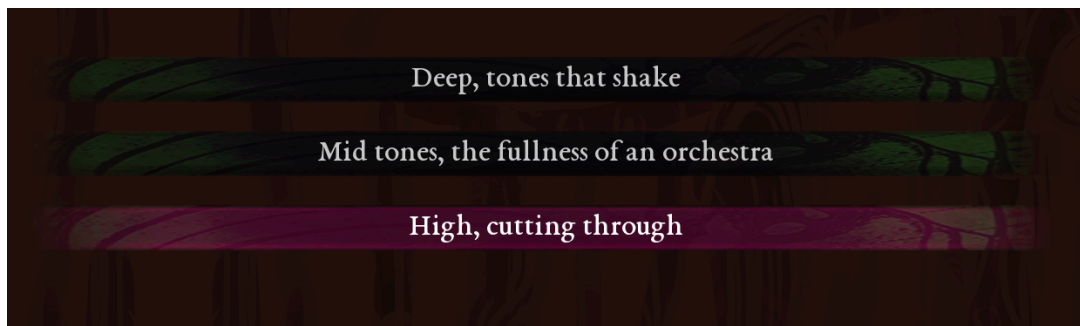
**Fig. 7.11** Screenshot of an encounter with the Sculptor. If the player has created a character using the heart piece, then the Sculptor will say this in response.

These sensual scenes blur lines between the inside and outside of bodies, interfacing in unexpected ways beyond familiar human orifices. The grotesque entangling makes previously inaccessible flesh exposed and therefore more tantalizing. As the player constructs their body from pieces to realize potentials beyond male and female, they desire others that share similarly ambiguous bodies.

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<sup>26</sup> Trans for Trans, a trans person primarily seeking out other trans people for sexual and/or romantic relationships.

I highlight the transformative power of these bodies while also hinting at the more difficult aspects of surgery. When the player morphs into their new form at the beginning of the game, parts of the transformation are described as painful. The player can select from three different voices (figure 7.11). Once chosen, the player character's dialogue suggests they have started to choke in pain. The narrator says, "As quickly as the pain starts, it fades leaving a soft buzzing against your neck. Busy little microscopic cells sliding to and fro. You choke, coughing a bit to get used to the new sound and tension."



**Fig. 7.12** Screenshot featuring the voice selection screen. Each has an inhuman warble. This is somewhat an exaggeration of vocal changes caused by testosterone that can lead to cracks and squeaks as the body adjusts.

The Champion eventually asks the player if it felt good to change into their current form. The player has the option to say that it was painful, in which The Champion responds, "The pain is part of it, silly!." When the player says, "Will it hurt again?" they respond, "Undoubtedly, growing pains." Most trans surgery involves long recovery times, full of bruising, swelling, stitches, and pain. Immediately after surgery is an emotionally difficult time due to the physical discomfort and the impacts

of anesthesia or other medications. For a brief moment, temporary unpleasantness can lead to feelings of regret or fear. The healing process weaved its way into the magical transformation making it not a clean nor tidy process. The pain is an important part of the pleasure that follows. By pushing player comfort levels, characters become even more alluring. Another of Cohen's theses, that fear of the monster is another kind of desire, makes the forbidden nature of the body's interior an exciting prospect (Cohen, 16). While these beings could never exist in the real world similar to the mutilated cenobites in *Hellraiser*, exploring forbidden intimacies within the fiction of the monster allows for a safe, but exciting, experience. Games like these appeal to queer and trans people who feel othered and want to see their desires represented in strange forms.

There are many more science fiction explorations in the game, reveling in a grotesque future where architecture, machine, human, plant, and animal become an ever increasingly complicated tapestry with few boundaries in between. The player can merge with the living, hivemind entity of the Crucible and one of the characters is a sentient offshoot of the living walls themselves, but you'll have to play it for yourself to learn more.



## VIII. Interplay and Intersections with *Facades of Ingress*



**Fig. 8.1** Two players engaging with *Facades of Ingress* seen from the flesh window

One key feature of my piece is how it crosses over and merges into Kristopher Funk's installation *Facades of Ingress*. *Facades of Ingress* is a multiplayer, live action puzzle game integrated into a large, looming monster covered in pill bottles and bright orange crystals. Players solve puzzles and feed the monster different prescriptions in an infinite loop. The piece offers no win state. If desired, players can expend spoons<sup>27</sup> to be given hints in order to solve puzzles, but these hints are

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<sup>27</sup> Spoon Theory is a theory in disability studies that every person has a limited amount of energy, symbolized by spoons, in a given day. Each task expends energy and takes different amounts of spoons. This is used to explain how disabled people often need to expend more spoons on a task than a non-disabled person might. It illustrates how the same tasks or situations take different amounts of spoons depending on the individual. For example, if two people start the day with five

purposefully unhelpful. The piece comments on the bureaucracy that inhibits disabled people from accessing accommodations and resources to function day to day. The initial intention was to engage specifically with accessibility in higher education, but it expanded to multiple contexts. His installation is surrounded by hospital-like curtains locking players in a room with the creature.



**Fig. 8.2** One of two torn latex windows that allow players to watch as well as pass spoons to players on the opposite side. Above the disk are some of the aforementioned spoons that are hidden from those who need them on the other side.

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spoons, going to the grocery store may only take one spoon for person A, but for person B it might take four due to the sensory stimulation or amount of walking.

On the wall that borders our two installations, there are two latex disks that have partially deteriorated allowing them to be windows into both worlds (one can be seen in figure 8.2). Between the two disks on the side with *Facades of Ingress* is a sign that reads “Out of spoons<sup>28</sup>? That sucks! Maybe your community can help you out . REACH ACROSS THE VOID AND ASK.” Scattered in different corners of the fleshy cavern are golden spoons that visitors can collect and offer to players in Funk’s installation. This forced players to reach out and ask for help from people who likely didn’t know what they were talking about. By creating tension between the two exhibits, visitors overall felt part of a larger narrative.

Thematically, our works compliment each other. Trans and disabled narratives find solidarity within the medical industrial complex. The same gatekeeping surrounding disability accommodations mirrors the gatekeeping of transition resources and procedures. These barriers are reflected in the introduction of my game. It opens on a medical provider holding authority over the player character’s lived experience, telling the player, “To be frank, I don’t believe what you’re asking for is medically necessary,” while the player’s character is forced to listen in an uncomfortable chair, “...marketed to calm patients in medical settings. Something about mimicking a ‘mother’s embrace.’ But it’s only making you feel worse. Melted

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<sup>28</sup> Running out of spoons, with the previous definition of Spoon Theory in mind, means the equivalent of running out of energy. If this threshold is pushed it can result in physical injury or psychological distress to a person. In this case, the external community giving more spoons can be interpreted as others helping when the one who has run out of spoons cannot continue a task or be in a situation.

and spread thin across the floor.” It highlights the unease from these types of interactions when a patient must feign compliance to avoid being labeled as defiant. As mentioned previously in the game *Sorry, We Have a Policy*, endless, frustrating loops are evocative game design techniques to pull players into cycles they cannot win. The dramatic act of characters dying while waiting in line becomes painfully real as both disabled and trans people die as a result of violence or not getting the care they need. Disabled and trans people are expected to look and act a particular way while falling to the sidelines of society. Both are considered a deviation from a “normal” human being, one that should either be cured through a proposed solution or cease to exist. Intersex and hormonal conditions overlap with struggles faced by many trans people. The “correction” of intersex infants to their “true sex” through surgery is one of the origins of gender reassignment<sup>29</sup> surgery. One is entirely non consensual and the other a willful decision by an informed adult. In these ways and many more, the struggles faced by disabled people trying to gain the resources they need parallel the needs of trans people trying to comfortably and confidently exist.

With one artwork locked in the overwhelming, cyclical, medical process and the other suggesting an escape, offering assistance to players becomes an act of greater community care. Doing so allows both pieces to highlight profound problems within the medical industrial complex while at the same time suggesting people can support one another in spite of it.

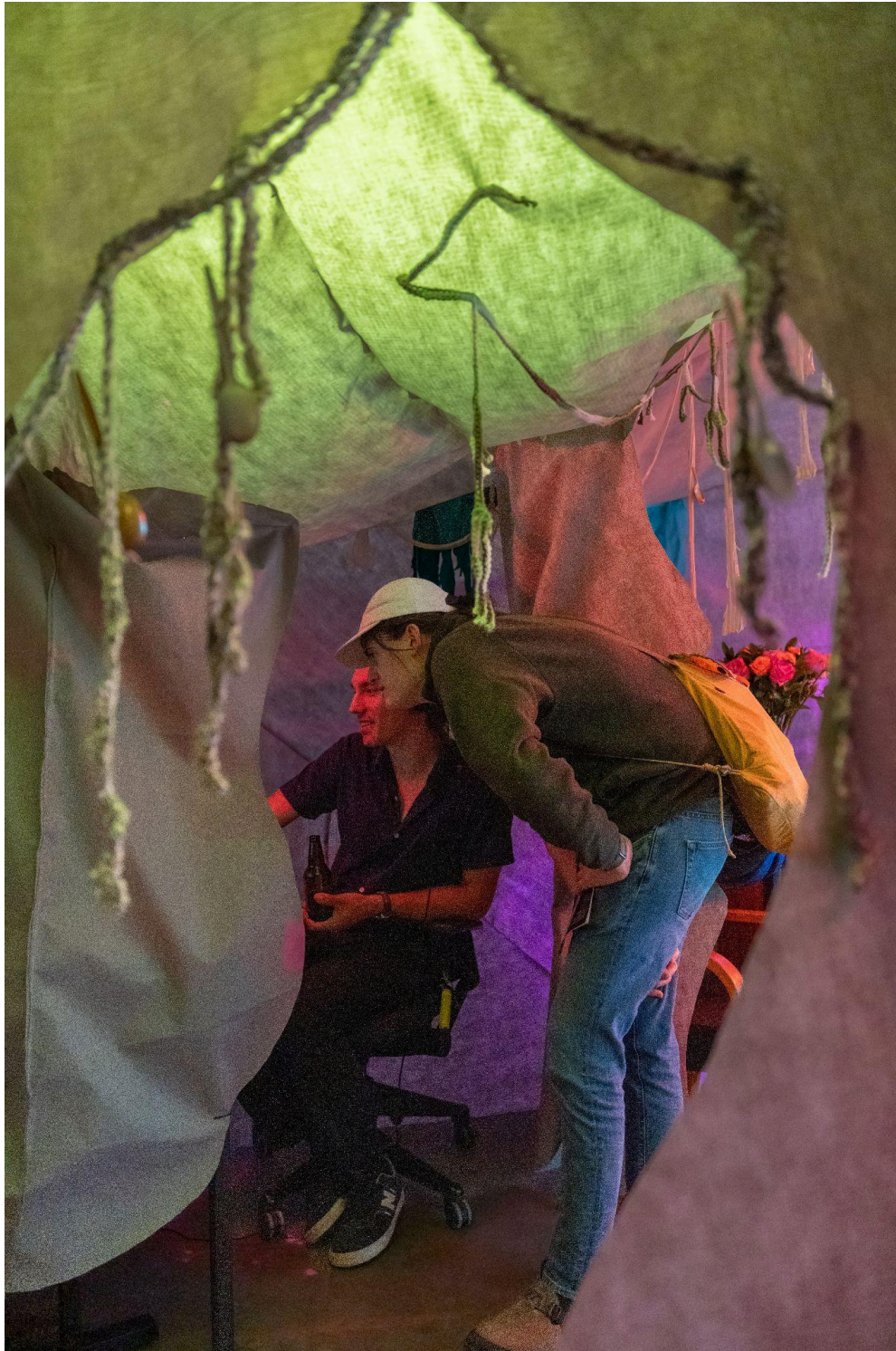
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<sup>29</sup> Now usually called “gender affirmation surgery” instead of “gender reassignment surgery.”

## **IX. Audience and player responses**

In earlier stages of development, I wondered if the connections I drew between the grotesque and transness would be unclear to the audience. Worse, I was concerned that my piece would be interpreted as a blanket statement of disgust towards medical transition. However, after speaking with many people during and after the exhibition, as well as through comments on my *itch.io* game page, I'm confident that my message shined through despite all the murky, gooey membranes.

The cave-like structure led many participants to feel immersed in another world where these structures were commonplace. Participants who took time to explore the game quickly understood the connection between the digital papery archways and the real world twists and turns. For both players interacting with the digital game and those collaging, the environment added to what they were doing, tricking their bodies into thinking they were truly in another realm. A comment I had often was that it was a comfortable space to stay in for long periods of time. I often saw visitors sitting on the two sofa chairs by the entrance, quite comfortable in the warm orange glow observing others or chatting. Nobody thought twice about touching objects in the space and it made sense that participants could interact with everything. While my intention was to make the computers hidden for player comfort and to make discovering the computers a fun activity, some players couldn't find the computer cubbies or felt like they were intruding.



**Fig. 9.1** One visitor seated and playing *A Night for Flesh and Roses* while another watches.



**Fig. 9.2** Several participants talking while playing with the digital character creator.

Some struggled to understand the drag and drop mechanic due to slightly unintuitive controls, but eventually everyone was able to move the pieces around. When participants touched the silicone mouse, there were many exclamations of “Ew!” or “Woah, touch this!” with some finding the mice incredibly comfortable<sup>30</sup>. Many became intrigued by how such a commonplace object like a computer mouse could become so alien. It was a delightful introduction for people who ventured further inside. By not having fixed locations for body parts, players understood it to be about freedom of expression, though some assumed there must be a proper order like a puzzle. There is a backing audio track I made with mechanical sound samples

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<sup>30</sup> I had a few offers to create more flesh mouse covers as some visitors liked them so much they would gladly purchase them for their personal use.

taken by Jordan Fickel in UCSC's Digital Arts Research Center, me playing an electric bass guitar, and heartbeat sounds. However, I was unable to get the audio track to properly loop, so it wasn't always audible during the duration of the exhibition. While I plan to fix this bug, ultimately it didn't lessen the experience.

The most popular area of my installation was the analog, collage, crafting area. Besides being an inviting activity, players found it more immediate than the digital character creator counterpart as they could manipulate physical objects far more intuitively. I observed many adults as well as children (figure 9.3 and 9.4) creating their own artworks with the organ cutouts provided. The hands-on craft experience supported my goal to get visitors making something of their own. In turn this made my piece memorable. While most decided to leave their finished collages in the installation, others took them home as a memory of the exhibition. Immediately, participants noticed how the pinned boards resembled insect specimens. The act of pinning made the pieces feel like real anatomical parts rather than just paper, giving many the impression they were crafting new organisms. One felt as though they were in a gothic or Frankensteinian realm building their next creation. Another connected the bizarre bodies to unconventional gender transition pathways. People appreciated having other collages hung around the room as it inspired their own work. Many started conversations around the table about what they were making, turning a solo activity into a larger, collaborative effort.





**Fig. 9.3 and 9.4** A parent and child working on a creature together.



**Fig. 9.5** Screenshot of a minor character who was constructed by a participant at open studios in fall 2023. I scattered many participants' creations throughout the game to add variety as well as give the world a larger feeling with characters not made by my hands.

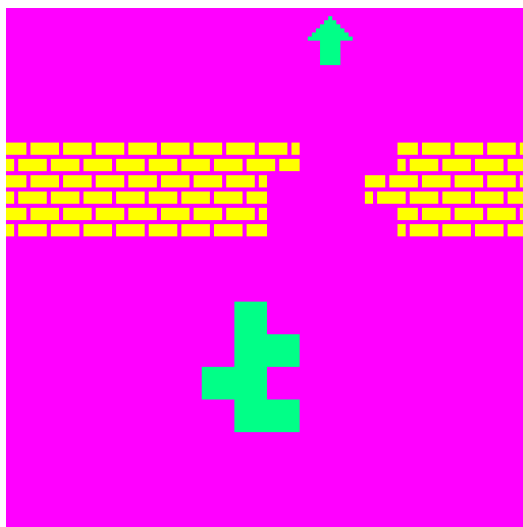
While the transition themes weren't clear to some initially, playing the game made the ideas click. Some were initially revolted by the anatomical subject matter, but also attracted to the dense visuals and were overwhelmed with curiosity. Horror gave way to something more sweet, romantic, and relatable. Some commenters on my *itch.io* page were very excited describing it as “Feelin like i've guzzled a barrel of coffin varnish [...] lol (//•w•//)”<sup>31</sup> and another “\*sickos voice\* Yes! Hahaha yes!!!”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Most likely translation: “This is so creepy and goth, laughing out loud, blushing surprised face.”

<sup>32</sup> A popular meme referencing a comic where a man labeled “SICKOS” is pressed up against a window yelling “Yes... Ha Ha Ha... YES!” as a suburban family fearfully watches the news. It’s usually used to reference extreme enjoyment over a piece of media that might be considered distasteful, self-indulgent, or strange.

Another loved seeing a visual novel that strayed away from conventional, attractive human characters. Trans people both online and at the exhibition responded powerfully to my work describing it as a relatable metaphor to being trans and disabled, fascinated with the abnormal augmentation of the body. Many had previously felt non-human and found solace in a community of monsters. It became a place for players to explore new identities and be like, as well as be liked by, the eccentric characters they met. While I can easily envision how I can flesh out the narrative even more, most players felt a part of a larger world.



**Fig. 9.6** The sequence from *Dys4ia* where the player must fit through a gap.

One player compared a moment in *A Night for Flesh and Roses* to Anna Anthropy's *Dys4ia*. In one section you need to remove all your bones to fit through a narrow space. This resembles a stage in *Dys4ia* where the player moves their avatar to fit through a gap representing Anthropy's desire for her

body to fit into particular shapes. They also interpreted this, combined with the free flowing, sometimes obtuse puzzles, as navigating the confusing medical systems of insurance, doctors, and other barriers to trans healthcare. I was excited to see this connection as it grounded my work in a larger lineage of trans games.

## X. Conclusion: Towards Future Bodies



**Fig. 10.1** Screenshot of a character remarking how much they enjoy being able to meld and transform.

There is no such thing as the “right body” just as there is no “wrong body.” There are only possible bodies, and as they get more strange, elaborate, and intersectional, we can comprehend a fraction of what we might become<sup>33</sup>. The body that is “untouched” by human devised augmentations is no more sacred than the monstrous one. As described by Sherryl Vint in her book, *Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction*, “I want to strive towards an ethical posthumanism, one that recognizes... that human was only ever a temporary category in the first place” (Vint, 175). She places importance not discarding the body

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<sup>33</sup> And I am not merely speaking to a type of medical or surgical intervention, however fun that is.

altogether to be replaced by a techno-futurist immortal shell; nor does she value a clinging to an essentialist past. The human as defined by male and female has been, and will be, a temporary category.



**Fig. 10.2** Close up of an original puppet.

Reclaiming horror imagery allows trans people to feel powerful in a body that is considered monstrous. In a time of reactionary politics, where healthcare and rights for trans people are crumbling, it is important to be unapologetically ourselves more than ever. Denying one's essential self in order to assimilate into an oppressive culture does not guarantee safety, but only delays inevitable persecution and ostracization. Reveling in the strange, creating art that pokes and prods, allows trans people to take some control over the narrative. How effective this will be is unknown and it isn't an appealing prospect to trans people who consider themselves thoroughly normal.

But through all the different possible trans bodies and creations, the grotesque hybrids and stitched dreams, trans people can support one another and survive. I have made it through the past, and have no idea what the future may hold, but we can support each other now in whatever societally ostracized configuration we wish.



**Fig. 10.3** Participant made collage that cheers for getting to the end of my thesis.

This is what I mean by approaching the sublime: a world of boundless possibility and the promise of discarding hierarchies. Nature isn't immutable and the world can never be neatly understood nor categorized. I want to continue building trans focused, speculative worlds where we can finally feel a freedom not from our flesh, but of it and with each other. Our bodies and those bodies around us are all we can carry for but a brief moment, and I intend to remix bodies in their disgusting glory.

## Appendices

### Additional Play Recommendations

Outside of the games referenced in this thesis, here are other recommendations that are queer/trans oriented and/or fun subversions on genres discussed previously and/or

I just think they're neat:

<https://dominoclub.itch.io/erostasis>

<https://pillowfight.itch.io/we-know-the-devil>

<http://ladykillerinabind.com/>

<https://pantagruel.itch.io/discover-my-body>

<https://hthr.itch.io/extreme-meatpunks-forever>

<https://gendervamp.itch.io/gay-monster-kiss-club>

<https://glaveguisarme.itch.io/you-are-an-unfinished-thing>

<https://nartier.itch.io/wrought-flesh>

<https://kasuraga.itch.io/how-fish-is-made>

<https://communistsister.itch.io/winter>

Quirky “dress up” games:

<https://eurritz.itch.io/dress-up-gender>

<https://dandandansfw.itch.io/his-boyfriends-wardrobe>

<https://altopunk.itch.io/femmepocalypseplus>

<https://jwhop.itch.io/bone-to-pick>

## **A note on gore and transphobia fatigue**

Throughout my process, I researched not just illustrations, but surgical photos and videos themselves. Before I had surgery, it was easier to intellectualize and romanticize these elements. However, I cannot overstate that the “cool” factor doesn’t compare to the reality of seeing my arm and imagining it as a flakey croissant ready to fall apart. It was overwhelming physically, which made working on the game emotionally taxing as I began to doubt my aesthetic choices. It influenced lines of dialogue and helped me consider what quirks a fleshcrafted, sci-fi body would have.

Additionally, seeing endless transphobia online wore me out, particularly when the surgery I had was targeted. Posts became direct insults to what my body would be/is. I even looked up my common username on kiwifarms (a horrible website full of horrible people) and people behind the curtain were saying horrendous things about me based on my posts. I won’t include quotes, as they are truly awful, but the comparison to the hyena was something I witnessed firsthand that at least was creative. Being close to the subject matter, I was banking on people “getting the point.” Thankfully, people did, but I hope I can move on, at least for a little while, to less intense visual themes.

To people who are seeing this thesis in the future I hope this is a time capsule and things are a lot better now. I hope the transphobia I witness now has become a distant memory.



## Select code excerpts

Part of the introduction:

```
label start:

    scene blank
    menu:
        "Breathe":
            $ player_name = "__You__"
            $ player_voice = "null"
            pass
            "So, this is what you're wanting?"
            "It isn't necessarily impossible. Labs have been able to
            replicate this procedure in vitro."
            "However, I doubt any sane surgeon would grant your request."
            "To be frank, I don't believe what you're asking for is
            medically necessary."
            "I understand this is disappointing to hear. We're all about
            informed consent here, but there are lines people don't want to
            cross and I'm speaking from all the current recommended
            guidelines."
            "I can refer you to a counselor, one who has experience with
            requests like yours."
            "Talk to them, unpack what's going on for you right now."
            narrator "{i}The chair is uncomfortably warm. It's marketed
            to calm patients in medical settings. Something about mimicking a
            'mother's embrace'{/i}"
            narrator "{i}But it's only making you feel worse. Melted and
            spread thin across the floor.{/i}"
            player "I guess I'll take the referral."
            "Wonderful!"
            "They're really nice, very supportive of unique characters."
            player "Sure, ok."
            narrator "{i}It's the sound of defeat.{/i}"
            show transparent with hpunch
```

```
narrator "{i}The inside of your wrist hums. The introductory
message adds to the clutter of your inbox.{/i}"
"Have a good day."
player "You too."
narrator "{i}You don't mean it.{/i}"
```

### Creating a character name:

```
centered "{i}The sensual, undulating stone draws you in with the
intent to swallow you whole.{/i}"
    centered "{i}You approach the towering structure. An ever
changing castle.{/i}"
    centered "{i}Even in an era of biomedical transformation and
engineering, this place was something else entirely.{/i}"
    player "Is this where they've been all this time?{w} This
is..."
    centered "{i}Getting closer to the door an urge takes over
you.{w} Not unpleasantly, but it is vast and
immediate.{/i}"
    centered "{i}Something tugs at the center of what you are,{w}
it begs a particular question.{/i}"
    centered "{i}You are...{/i}"
menu:
    "A Vessel":
        $ player_name= "~Vessel~"
    "Flesh":
        $ player_name= "*Flesh*"
    "An Architect":
        $ player_name= "^Architect^"
    "I make my own names":
        $ player_name = renpy.input("Pen your new name in the
ink of time. Then press enter.")
        $ player_name = player_name.strip()
```

Describing the player's body:

```
if squishy >= 3:
    centered "{i}Your body seems to be soft and pliable,
a glistening sheen.{/i}"
    if boney >= 3:
        centered "{i}Your body's skeletal structure, it's a
beautiful armature.{/i}"
    if muscular >= 3:
        centered "{i}Your body has strength, a youthful
musculature.{/i}"
```

Talking with The Host about how their bodies are able to exist:

```
"How is any of this possible?":
    hide knight ambient
    show knight thinking
    k "That is a very interesting question."
    k "I haven't given it much thought. I'm grateful,
don't misunderstand, however I don't dabble in those affairs."
    k "There has been a fair amount of current
research into the modification of the body. Though there are no
acting surgeons here nor endocrinologists."
    k "An alien influence perhaps? Again, highly
unlikely."
    hide knight thinking
    show knight feels
    k "Perhaps it is some sort of galvanism. One in
which we all died upon passing through that door-"
    "{i}A knowing glance towards the maw behind you,
sealed shut.{/i}"
    k "-And now, we are all Frankenstein creations of
our own making."
    hide knight feels
    show knight thinking
    k "But that would be very dramatic. Improbable,
```

```
however, if all other logical options have been eliminated, the
final possibility must be true."
```

```
    narrator "{i>You really, Really hope you're not
dead. That would be incredibly unfortunate./i}"
```

Descriptions of the player's body that vary during an intimate encounter:

```
"Pull them into an embrace":
scene blank with dissolve
centered "{i>You turn around to face them and take a moment to
move strange limbs across their knobby back./i}"
centered "{i>You explore each other first with curiosity then
excitement./i}"
centered "{i>There are countless ways your parts can
intermesh./i}"
    if boney >= 2:
        centered "{i>Your bones grind against each other
like worn away cartilage./i}"
    if squishy >= 2:
        centered "{i>Your guts entwine over theirs like
tentacles./i}"
    if muscular >= 2:
        centered "{i>Your muscles contract and flex
against their touch./i}"
```

Example of button layout in different areas with “jump” indicating the area of code the player will go to:

```
screen courtyardNavigationButtons:
    imagebutton:
        idle "images/buttonsNav/courtyardHeartUnhovered.png"
        hover "images/buttonsNav/courtyardHeartHovered.png"
        focus_mask True
        action Jump("heartPortal")
    imagebutton:
```

```

        idle "images/buttonsNav/courtyardToHelpDeskUnhovered.png"
        hover "images/buttonsNav/courtyardToHelpDeskHover.png"
        focus_mask True
        action Jump("helpDeskLobby")
    imagebutton:
        idle
"images/buttonsNav/courtyardToSculptureUnhovered.png"
        hover "images/buttonsNav/courtyardToSculptureHover.png"
        focus_mask True
        action Jump("sculptureGarden")
    imagebutton:
        idle "images/buttonsNav/courtyardToHallwayUnhovered.png"
        hover "images/buttonsNav/courtyardToHallwayHover.png"
        focus_mask True
        action Jump("hallway")
    imagebutton:
        idle "images/buttonsNav/fairyUnhovered.png"
        hover "images/buttonsNav/fairyHovered.png"
        focus_mask True
        action Jump("speakToFairy")
    imagebutton:
        idle "images/buttonsNav/character1UnhoveredCourtyard.png"
        hover "images/buttonsNav/character1HoveredCourtyard.png"
        focus_mask True
        action Jump("character1CourtyardChats")
    imagebutton:
        focus_mask True
        idle
"images/characterCustomization/bodyMenuButtonHighlight.png"
        hover "bodyMenuButtonHighlightAnimation"
        xanchor 0.5
        yanchor 1.0
        xpos 0.91
        ypos 1.0
        action Play("music", "audio/monsterZapJam.wav"),

```

```
ToggleScreen("characterCustomization", dissolve)
    clicked [SetVariable("creatorScreenActive", True)]
```

Variables for tracking what body parts a player currently is using as well as tracking how certain characters feel about the player:

```
default boney = 0
default muscular = 0
default squishy = 0

default brainActive = False
default footActive = False
default ribsActive = False
default muscleChunkActive = False
default thighSliceActive = False
default liverActive = False
default sinusActive = False
default eyeActive = False
default hipActive = False
default codexActive = False
default bowelActive = False
default jawBoneActive = False
default heartActive = False
default interiorJawActive = False
default torsoSkinActive = False
default smallFootActive = False
default meatRibsActive = False
default partialSkullActive = False

default BoneHandGiven = False
default BoneHandActive = False
default LungGiven = False
default LungActive = False
default EarSpiralGiven = False
default EarSpiralActive = False
```

```

#variables to indicate attitude
default kArousal = 0
default kFriend = 0
default kEnemy = 0

default dArousal = 0
default dFriend = 0
default dEnemy = 0

default wArousal = 0
default wFriend = 0
default wEnemy = 0

default bArousal = 0
default bFriend = 0
default bEnemy = 0

default jArousal = 0
default jFriend = 0
default jEnemy = 0

default fArousal = 0
default fFriend = 0
default fEnemy = 0

```

How the character animations are loaded into the game, one being the alpha channel video and the other being a transparency mask:

```

define f = Character("The Mesmer", callback = mesmer_voice)
image fairy chat = Movie(channel="fairy",
play="images/characterSprites/fairy/fairyChatUpdated.webm",
mask="images/characterSprites/fairy/fairyChatMaskUpdated.webm",
framedrop=False)
image fairy sorrow = Movie(channel="fairy",

```

```

play="images/characterSprites/fairy/fairyCryUpdated.webm",
mask="images/characterSprites/fairy/fairyCryMaskUpdated.webm",
framedrop=False)
image fairy joy = Movie(channel="fairy",
play="images/characterSprites/fairy/fairyExcitedUpdated.webm",
mask="images/characterSprites/fairy/fairyExcitedMaskUpdated.webm"
, framedrop=False)
image fairy ambient =
"images/characterSprites/fairy/fNeutral.png"

```

Architectural passage that is only accessible if the player is squishy:

```

label statuePortal:
    scene sculptureGarden
    "There appears to be a type of passage in between the rigid
structure of the statue."
    "A half skull pointed towards the sky watching for "
    if boney == 0 and squishy > 0 and waspDialogue == 1:
        "Your soft flesh presses against the narrow gap in the
muscular tunnel of the statue's throat."
        "It's a struggle, but if you wish, you can traverse into
the darkness."
        menu:
            "Proceed into the depths":
                jump activitiesArea
            "Oh hell no":
                "Totally not worth the risk."
    if boney > 0 and waspDialogue == 1:
        "While it looks like this might be where that Sculptor
character ran off to, your body is far too {i}boney{/i} to fit."
        "Perhaps this is worth looking into..."
    call screen sculptureGardenNavigationButtons

```



### Silly interaction with a character:

```
centered "{i}You frolic through the dense growth. You pretend you
are creatures you're not.{w} At least, not yet.{/i}"
centered "{i}The carefree levity lets you glide across the
not-quite-fabric earth.{/i}"
centered "{i>Your new fairy friend shows you sights, sounds,
textures, and tastes that become even more fantastical through
your imagination.{/i}"
f "I shall tell thee a secret."
f "Brave and noble Mesmer has not been able to reach the bottom
yet, but there below lies a much astounding beast."
f "I believe thou shalt be able to find it."
scene courtyard
show fairy sorrow with dissolve
f "Alas! I must be off. But come again for another journey."
```

### Sequence where the player and another character shape a being but defies description:

```
"{i}You slide into the space across from them reaching with
limbs and tendrils towards the construct.{/i}"
    hide bird ambient
    show bird chat
    b "Ah, not so fast!"
    hide bird chat
    show bird laugh
    b "You don't want to scare the poor thing."
    hide bird laugh
    show bird chat
    b "It's very sensitive to touch, especially with
those it doesn't know."
    hide bird chat
    show bird ambient
    "{i>Their pterosaur crest acts as a resonant chamber
projecting their voice.{/i}"
    hide bird ambient
```

```
show bird cry
b "Brush your ligaments together near its ear so it
knows you're coming, like this."
```

Scene that is a mix of hate and passion:

```
menu:
  "Nevermind...":
    "{i}It's not worth it.{w} No matter how
overwhelmingly tempting he makes it.{/i}"
    d "Hrmpf...{w}yeah, sure."
    "{i}He crosses boney arms and tries to not
make eye contact with you.{/i}"

  "You sick fuck":
    scene blank with dissolve
    centered "{i}A wolf snarl then a lunge. Claws
sink into you and you hiss in pain.{/i}"
    centered "\"You're a sick fuck yourself for
even stepping through that doorway.\""
    centered "{i}Sharp teeth hover in front of
you.{/i}"
    centered "\"You're in no position to judge
me.\"{w} {i}Their weight is overwhelming, but all you can think
about is wanting more.{/i}"
    centered "{i}A density of layers of meat that
have potential to unfold into something far greater.{/i}"
    centered "\"You're just looking for reasons
to hate me,{w} but we've always been the same.\""
    centered "\"Then why don't you show me!\"
{i}You scream.{/i} {w} \"Show me how to make the pain worth
it,{w} let me taste it\""
    centered "{i}You wrestle a limb free and lash
out at him drawing a trickle of blood.{/i}"
    centered "{i}First surprise, but it dissolves
```

```

into a mischievous grin./i>"
        centered "{i}Raptor pupils dilate and he
tears into you./i}"
        centered "{i}You scream./i}"
        centered "{i}Pieces and sinew pull apart and
he relishes every moment./i}"
        centered "{i}In turn, you claw apart his
chest and grip the undulating muscles inside./i}"
        centered "{i}The electromagnetic forces
suspending your tissues together send shockwaves through
you./i}"

```

One of seven endings where the “root” of the Crucible collapses taking everyone down with it:

```

"Give up":
centered "{i}The parts that used to be you tumble away from each
other./i}"
centered "{i}It would be painful if there was anything left to
feel pain./i}"
centered "{i}Senses begin to break down./i}"
centered "{i}Thoughts{/i}"
centered "{i}Words{/i}"
centered "{i}All gone{/i}"
centered "{i}Rotting{/i}"
centered "{i}Alone{/i}"
"Ending 5/7"
return

```

Part of an ending where the player leaves:

```

"I'm leaving.":
        player "And I'm not coming back."
        r "If you wish."
        r "We won't stop you."

```

```

        player "Really?"
        r "There is no point."
        r "Your prior configuration of body will return
once you have left my radius."
        r "You are afraid of new potentials."
        player "Maybe I am afraid... but I need time. I'm
not dealing with this now."
        r "Then when your fear ceases, you may return."
        scene blank
        centered "{i}The question continues to ring
through your bones as you leave the construct deep in the
earth.{/i}"
        centered "{i}Was this too far, too alien for you
to handle?{/i}"
                centered "{i}The corridors are
surprisingly vacant. Only with your thoughts and the pulsing
thrum beneath you.{/i}"
                centered "{i}You walk out the front
door{/i}"
        scene exterior

```

### Describing an encounter with the Crucible:

```

narrator "{i}The voice that rings as loud as the blood furiously
pumping through you.{/i}"
narrator "{i}For a moment all you can hear and feel are the ever
moving biological functions of the vast organism all around
you.{/i}"
narrator "{i}For it truly goes beyond organism. {w}Something
entirely new, or at least more akin to a network of plants or
fungi.{/i}"
narrator "{i}It considers.{/i}"
r "So that's what you're after."

```

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