"Videogame Design as A Practical Approach to Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928)"

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Abstract

What might it be like to play Orlando as a video game? For someone who reads Woolf there is a cathartic pleasure to be found in reinterpreting and reimagining this compelling text in an interactive format. My attempt to transpose the narrative of Orlando into another mode of storytelling and experience operates within the logic that the craft of game mechanics is integral to, if not outweighed by, the meaningful message that the game wants to pass on. The project consists of three distinctive discussion questions; namely, the purpose of making Orlando a playable character, the possible options for implementation and how the selected approach might work. In this essay I provide an account of the development and potential of my thought experiment of adapting Orlando as a videogame. My exploration focuses entirely on the conceptual foundation for the game such as character design and development of a specific game mechanic.

Keywords: Book-to-Game Adaptation, Virginia Woolf, Gender Identity, Game Mechanics

While literature and film remain central to adaptation studies today, videogame adaptation has increasingly featured in discussions surrounding transmediation. The shift from being a reader/viewer to a player places this negotiation front and centre. In its own right, a game adaptation promises a change in experience and relation to the narrative, especially when a player is (within certain constraints of the original characters, settings and themes, and the basic narrative trajectory) invited to reshape, if not rewrite, the static and linear prose.

As a reader of Woolf, there is a cathartic pleasure to be found in reinterpreting and reimagining this compelling text in an interactive format. The contemporary medium of the videogame allows me to engage with, and even to rework, the text in such a way that I find myself oscillating between the roles of media consumer and media producer. In this article, I discuss how I go beyond providing a reading of aspects of Woolf's work and actively participate in the

process of creating a deliberately interactive medium.[1] As I seek to explore the interactive potential of *Orlando*, I ask how a videogame may operate as an adaptation of Woolf's novel in ways that transcend the confinement of both the visual novel and the interactive videogame medium, while speaking of the book's main premise. Through rethinking adaptation more broadly I explore how an adaptation of Woolf's *Orlando* might be more diverse than a simplified representation of the text in the form of graphic novel. This is a question that should be answered through practice.

Orlando's sexual hijinks both at a narrative and symbolic level presuppose a fundamental challenge in the process of book-to-game adaption. On the one hand, the fact that the eponymous hero functions as an elusive character, who "performs" and "publicises" the construction of a convention-defying gender identity, could be considered a constraint. On the other hand, this affords a fair amount of leeway to implement a thrilling sartorial venture for the gameplay. Reading Woolf's methodology in *Orlando*, especially her manipulation of the trope of masquerade in tandem with her penchant for a high-spirited and ludic approach to genre or gender or, even, race (as testified not only in *Orlando*, but also dating back in 1910 to the practical joke on the *Dreadnought*), in this pilot project I explored the feasibility of adaptation in two main respects: as a mode of engagement (the boundary-crossing between the telling mode and the participatory mode) and as a resistance to binary thinking about a gendered identity (Hutcheon, 2012). The project comprises three distinctive discussion questions relating to the purpose of making Orlando a playable character, the possible options for implementation and how the selected approach might work.

For the purposes of my experiment, this videogame adaption project lies in something evolving around the simple opposition of gameplay and narrative only insofar as Woolf's prose and gaming experience meaningfully intersect. In reframing the experience of reading I start with Woolf's own practice of adaptation in which she circumvents the confining rules of biographical writing in her appropriation of Vita Sackville-West's life and works in *Orlando*.

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[1] When writing this essay I came across a practice-based study by game developer/educator Pippin Barr (2020), who provides a methodological account of his adaptation project. While we take a similarly proactive approach, there are stark differences in the nature of our works. Barr focuses on film adaptation as experimental game design, on violence in game specifically, and works from the perspective of a practitioner, whereas I deal with a novel-based game. Further, I approach the text with a significantly literature-oriented view. See more Barr (2020).

Orlando as a series of adaptation(s)

Woolf herself proved to be a master of adaptation when she rewrote the life of Vita Sackville-West, with whom she had a short-lived affair, in the mock biography of *Orlando*. In writing *Orlando* Woolf pushes against boundaries of various kinds apart from original and derivative: time and space, genres and formats, male and female, public and private.[2] In fact, she manipulates an already available repertoire of life-writing, the legacy of her father Sir Leslie Stephen, the inaugural editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* (Woolf, 1953).[3]

In July 1927 Woolf envisioned 'a biography beginning in the year 1500 & continuing to the present day…Vita; only with a change about from one sex to another', a result of which is a heady mix of the roman à clef and the mock biography (Woolf, 1953, p. 161). She later boasted in her letter to Sackville-West that she could 'revolutionise biography in a night' (Woolf, 1927, p. 429). By proclaiming herself a bold adapter, Woolf seems to be celebrating the advent of a long-coveted literary emancipation— it was not until she was forty that she finally 'found out how to begin…to say something in [her] own voice'(Woolf, 1953, p. 46). Given that Woolf reshapes the pre-existing narrative to fit her iconoclastic interest, we may read this literary escapade as the product of a performance of flightiness for its own sake. However, *Orlando* is not the only instance of Woolf's looking for some fun but coming out of it with renewed seriousness about female subjectivity. In many senses, *Orlando* seems to repeat the trajectory of the *Dreadnought* experience. Just as the practical joke turned out to be a parodic subversion of patriarchal values, *Orlando* as an adaptation goes beyond recounting Sackville-West's history to call into question the authenticity of the institutional establishment in life-writing (which was staunchly male-dominated). In both cases Woolf's temporary adventure establishes a reciprocal relationship between life as lived (the *Dreadnought* hoax, Woolf's sexcapade) and life as told (*Orlando* as mock biography). Such interdependency between the mode of storytelling and experience is technically and conceptually the basis for the new medium of the videogame. And it is these conceptual mechanics of the source text, the element of fun and audacity, that act as the driving force for the act of boundary crossing that provides a creative conduit for my thought experiment of adapting *Orlando* as a videogame.

By virtue of its ludic creativity, the story of *Orlando* offers enticing material for a game designer who reads the text as a fantasy biography of which

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[2] The term 'derivative' here does not, in any case, signify the 'second degree' status of the adaptation.

[3] It was also in this period that Woolf met Vita Sackville-West, a 'pronounced Sapphist' as she describes her, who was to become *Orlando*'s biographical subject.

the subject is historically and sexually mobile. *Orlando*'s fantastical plot centres on the life of an aspiring poet from the Elizabethan period to Woolf's present day. With a new sex—Orlando 'was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since'—the protagonist's ownership of a house (modeled on Sackville-West's ancestral manor Knole) is in limbo (Woolf, 1928/2014). By making the female Orlando win the lawsuit and manage to keep her property Woolf offers Sackville-West a consolation after the loss of Knole by virtue of the laws of male primogeniture.[4] Woolf's practice of adaptation, while attempting to reiterate iconic moments in Sackville-West's life, formulates radical changes that offer an inversion of the pre-existing story. In fact, Woolf creates the sense of a larger world than the internal conflict and uncertainty that permeates the life of Orlando (as well as Sackville-West's), a world governed by the flimsy rationale for the unjust distribution of labour and the confinement of gender hierarchy. The subversion of traditional distinctions between genres/genders and the incisive critique of the status quo are interconnected in ways that make *Orlando* no mere reproduction or replication of the precursor text from which it originated. Viewed in this light, *Orlando* is as an example of Linda Hutcheon's definition of adaptation as "a process of creation," and a "process of reception" which bring the adapted text and the adaptation into meaningful dialogue (Hutcheon, 2012). *Orlando*'s departure from Sackville-West's actual biography, establishes the authenticity of the book, while indiscreetly divulging Woolf's negation of the masculine stranglehold. Put simply, Woolf reshapes the pre-existing narrative to fit her iconoclastic interest to challenge the established order in the mutually constitutive domains of literature and gender. Woolf's disregard for fidelity to the ideal of veracity resonates with the voluble but often fickle narrator who 'promptly discards his role as a mouthpiece of conventional wisdom' and, as such, disparages the image of the omniscient biographical persona (Dhamanitayakul, 2018). This results in an adaptation that operates in the implausible storyline and seemingly irrational actions of the protagonist and the narrator alike. Viewed in the light of game making, the seemingly vague and obfuscatory prose allows considerable latitude when reworking the literary text into a participatory medium.

At a personal level, *Orlando* marks a significant moment in affirming Woolf's accomplishment as a writer. As she wrote in her diary '*Orlando* has done very well. Now I could go on writing like that', Woolf (1927) had finally found a foothold in a contemporary literary scene where men define the terms of work and value. At its best, her urge to diverge from the original text pushes the adaptation towards a more meaningful engagement with the sense of self. Seeing

[4] Towards the end of the novel Orlando gives birth to a son and consequently retains at least temporary control over her property. See also Briggs (2006, p. 200).

Woolf as an audacious, even recalcitrant, adapter, it is interesting to imagine her potential verdict on film adaptations of *Orlando*.[5] On one occasion, Woolf penned an essay on her early encounter with the cinema in which she was so overwhelmed by the sensation of amazement that she found 'our vocabulary is miserably insufficient' (Woolf, 1926). Woolf saw in the naturalistic medium of film its great potential that literature otherwise lacks, claiming that what she saw on the screen seemed 'more real, or real with a different reality from that which we perceive in daily life' (Woolf, 1926). Woolf, holding it in some awe, was aware of the cinema's tendency to tap into already available artistic resources, especially literature, when she acerbically pointed to the 'picture-makers' who 'want to be *improving, altering, making an art of their own*' (emphasis added).[6]

When Woolf transposed the life of Sackville-West into a work of fiction, she seemed to handle the preexisting narrative with care, noting in a self-restrained manner, 'But the balance between truth and fantasy must be careful' (Woolf, 1953, p. 115). As it turned out, however, the resultant prose transcended the mundane mode of biographical writing and was famously described by Nigel Nicolson (Sackville-West's son) as 'the longest and most charming love letter in literature' (Nicolson, 1992). Despite her eagerness to lampoon the legacy of literary forebears, when it comes to adapting works of literature into films, Woolf unapologetically defended the (supposed) cultural superiority of the former. In other words, she expressed a fair amount of skepticism about text to film adaptation. Chastising the cinema for its parasitic exploitation of literary works, she bemoans the fact that the cinema 'fell upon its prey with immense rapacity' and 'subsists upon the body of its unfortunate victim' (Woolf, 1926). More specifically, in her meditation on a text migrating from the hermeneutic to imagistic domain, she disparages the language of film when she envisages a cinematic adaptation of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878), comparing it to 'the scrawl of an illiterate schoolboy'.[7]

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[5] Long before Sally Potter's *Orlando*, there was a film by German filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger that revisited Woolf's novel: *Freak Orlando* (1981) telling the story of "Freak" Orlando, a gender-fluid time traveller who appears in various guises and deformities throughout the five episodes of the film. Within the scope of this essay, I only touch on the more widely known work of Potter. For more readings, both films have been comprehensively discussed by critics and scholars. See for example, Ouditt (1999) and Rickels (2008).

[6] Given that Woolf even wrote 'All the famous novels of the world, with their well-known characters, and their famous scenes, only asked, it seemed, to be put on the films.', it is tempting to infer that film adaptations of *Orlando* might not have been entirely unexpected to her.

[7] See also Hutcheon (2012, p. 58).

When the book of *Orlando* was adapted for the screen in 1992, director Sally Potter (n.d.) was oscillating between an alignment with and a departure from the pre-existing narrative. In her note on the adaptation of the book *Orlando*, the award-winning filmmaker remarked that her book-to-film project was processed 'with a view more consistently detached and bitingly ironic in its view of the English class system and the colonial attitudes arising from it' (Potter, n.d.). Potter's adaptation of *Orlando* while seeking to remain true to the spirit of book and to Woolf's intention, endorses the undoing of privileges and prerogatives based on the English class system, the very system from which the undeniably financially and socially privileged female writer of the modern era benefited. In its own way, the film turned out to be, to borrow from Bethany Layne, 'confrontation as much as celebration' as it speaks with insight and candor about novel's, as well as the adaptation's, assertion of liberation (Layne, 2018). In their own right, Woolf's novel and Potter's film re-examine the original narrative as they manifest a similar ethos of political engagement and make meaningful adaptations at many levels. Here we have life transformed into art, book into film and film talked about life.

Conceptually, I take my cue from their practice of adaptation in creating my version of "An Orlando of one's own", as each illuminates the role adaptation plays in engaging and reshaping the precursor text.[8] In particular, I wish to place this work in dialogue with Woolf's own thoughts about adaptation. Before proceeding with the discussion of a potential game based on the story of *Orlando*, it is useful to look into current research in the particular field of novel-to videogame adaptation.

Novel-to-Videogame Adaptation

Little academic attention has been paid to novel-to-game adaptation. In fact, more discussions have been made about the video game movie and vice versa in various aspects from technological to historical. Michael Ryan Moore, for example, approaches film-to-video game adaptations in its technological aspect as he examines the alliance between games and film—the so-called three-act-structure: 'establishing conflict, playing out conflict, and finally resolving conflict'— and how the protocols of interactive digital worlds allow us to transfer content across different forms (Moore, 2010). Drawing from historical accounts of games based on films produced between 1982 and 1994, Riccardo Fassone (2018) writes in defense of 'bad' games. Fassone brings to the fore the correlation between the collapse of the American video game market of 1982-

[8] The phrase is adapted from Bethany Layne's "a Woolf of the author's own", a discernible play on Woolf's much-acclaimed title *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Layne coined the phrase in her essay on biographical novels about Woolf, "Biofiction and the Paratext: Troubling Claims to "Truth" (2018).

1983 and the flop of Atari's adaptation of Spielberg's film *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* in 1982, whose stigma of failure earned it the title 'Worst video game of all time' (Townsend, 2006). He maintains that "notoriously" bad adaptations are a product of pre-existing cultural material and, as such, stand as relevant historical traces (Fassone, 2018). Like the prevailing literature on the corpus of film-to-game adaptations, both studies are significantly informed by the persisting binary of narratology and ludology as they put into perspective the cultural and artistic landscape of games in which narrative is often in inverse proportion to game play. Given a general presumption that films are adapted more easily to game thanks to their close relationship and the shared visual and audio aspects, critics have been quick to give their verdict.

While studies of game adaptation confine their attention to the commercial and critical failure/success of movie-based games (markedly because of substantial profits and the extensive growth of the progressive medium in the lucrative market), research on book-to-game adaptation tends to take more conceptual approaches in probing the boundary-crossing between the telling and the participatory modes. Dawn Stobbart, for example, in his article "Adaptation and New Media: Establishing the Video Game as an Adaptive Medium" explores the phenomenon of "metacriticism of the medium via adaptation". He argues how the video game *Bioshock* (2007) "goes beyond" adapting Ayn Rand's 1957 novel *Atlas Shrugged,* to present a critique of Rand's ideology and supply the parallel notion of freewill and discourses on agency in video games (Stobbart, 2018). Likewise, Julian Novitz (2020) has recently scrutinized the concept which is no less intangible in his analysis of the four videogame adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Revisiting Jacques Derrida's notion of 'spectral' qualities in Shakespeare's plays, Novitz examines the relationship between the psychological complexity in the character of Hamlet and the player agency associated with conventional gameplay. In Andrew Cutting's (2011) "Interiority, Affordances, and the Possibility of Adapting Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* as a Video Game" the central thesis focuses on the 'apparent gulf' between Jamesian prose (known for its deliberate inexpressibility) and gameplay conventions that are generally preoccupied with physical action and exteriority. Having identified potential solutions, Cutting concludes that the gap 'need not be unbridgeable'. Nevertheless, the thought adaptation is never realized. Cutting is not especially unique in his views on the tangible dichotomy between exteriority and interiority. Testing out the generally accepted dogma that some abstract concepts and the interiority of characters 'remain "untranslatable" in interactive media, Hutcheon (2012) re-examines the relationship between the avatar and the player. She maintains that the former has no real interiority and they are manipulated by the latter in exerting their own motives and desires, even fears. Bluntly, yet undeniably, Hutcheon (2012) concludes that the truisms of theory must be tested

against actual practice (p. 63). While these studies have brought to light a largely unexplored area of novel-to-game adaptation, particularly its breaking of typical impasses inherent in rendering literary fiction, their approaches to adaptation are invariably hypothetical rather than experiential.

Quite fortuitously, Kamilla Elliot (2014) once echoed the sheer fact that 'adaptation scholars tend not to do adaptation'.[9] Quoting Leitch, the professor in adaptation studies recounts how she was alerted by her students' unprogressive stance on literary film adaptation and consequently assigned them a 'creative-critical project'. The resultant works, which range from a three-tier cake adapting three chapters of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1867) to an interhistorical adaptation that sets Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) in World War I, 'free [students] from traditional modes of cultural pedagogy' which, as she puts it, 'seeks to inculcate them with dominant ideologies and values through the aesthetic productions of others' (Elliot, 2014, 75). Although Elliot's rationale for the project is massively pedagogic, I share with her the belief that engaging in adaptation as a process illuminates one's critical and theoretical insights into the pre-existing text in ways that allow new reflections on adaptation practice. From the outset my commitment to active participation has superseded that of the interpretative effort. Having been contemplating the task of doing literary video game adaptation, I see the potential for engaging in Woolf's repertoire in ways that are more progressive and pragmatic than offering usual critical essays on adaptation. The dynamism of this experience will also be marked by a deep and sustained engagement with the meaning-making process of the game and the ideas behind the game experiences.

Transposing the Narrative of *Orlando*

What might it be like to play Orlando in a video game? For someone who reads Woolf there is a cathartic pleasure to be found in reinterpreting and reimagining this compelling text in an interactive format. In terms of its transformative potential, *Orlando*'s episodic storyline is relatively ideal for game adaptation (Orlando moved in time through 400 years seeing different periods of English history). Besides, there are several moments in *Orlando* that foster physical action for gameplay, for example, the ice-skating scene with Sasha against the backdrop of the Great Frost of 1608, the revolt against the Sultan in Constantinople or the riding of a donkey to Broussa in the company of gypsies etc. Despite such assets, it can be difficult to conceive how a videogame could thematically engage the player and re-enact the experience and immersion

[9] The remark was originally made by Thomas Leitch in a talk 'Adaptation and Translation' presented at 'Film Adaptation: A Dialogue among Approaches', Alfried Krupp Wissenschaftskolleg, Greifswald, Germany, 18 April 2013.

in the fictive world of *Orlando*. To reinvent the text of *Orlando* to fit with familiar videogame conventions, a game developer needs to imagine the coalescence of the character's and the player's temporary excursion into the diegetic game world. It is not just a question of how to unfold the entire narrative over interactivity but rather how much players are invited to rethink the original text.

At this point it seems almost trite to ask how to recreate and recontextualise a piece of literary prose into a game adaptation, while this forms the basis for my project. While I would not dismiss a question of this kind, I will make clear that it does not essentially provide the rationale for my thought experiment of adapting *Orlando*. That said, this study aims to do more than testing a general presumption that certain aspects, which appear to be an extreme case, make a novel inherently unsuitable, if not unavailable, for videogame adaptation. This topic has been thoroughly examined as illustrated by the preceding examples.

Conceptually, my hypothetical book-to-game adaptation of Woolf's *Orlando* seeks to go beyond familiarising players with the precursor text. Taking a more introspective approach, the project aims to resurface, if not answer, the ontological questions Woolf posed in her work. As a reader-turned-adapter I have taken the opportunity to analyse and revisit the text through a different lens, while exploring the formal and ideological aspects of adaptation first-hand. Having discussed why this adaptation project might be a meaningful endeavour for Woolf readers, game designers and adaptation scholars, in the following section I will probe into character design and core game mechanics. The former focuses exclusively on the principal character. As this adaptation project is still in a developmental process, there is plenty of scope for developing ideas. Further experimentations on the other elements are still needed in order to deliver a solid game that is consistent with the novel.

Interactivity and player agency in the videogame adaptation of *Orlando*

Agency and interactivity are fundamental to game play as they change the way in which one engages narrative and adaptation. Where textual and physical boundaries are transgressed, a videogame adaptation stands on its own terms as it offers a sense of control and self-efficacy in ways not possible with the linear narrative of fiction. The challenge, however, lies in how the game seeks to immerse the player in a situation that requires self-reflection, while still engaging with the themes and motifs of the source text.

For my adaptation project the quest to have a character that takes its cue from Woolf's flamboyant iconoclasm is one of the primary design goals. So much so that interactivity and player agency is a big part of character design; the active role the player takes in the video game may give the illusion of Orlando's freedom to oscillate between sexes. Nonetheless, part of the dilemma stems from Woolf's vigorous portrayal of the restricted life imposed on Orlando by society.

For example, while female Orlando is described as being subsumed by oppressive social norms and restrictions on the female body, in the pursuit of the truth about life she appears to maintain her autonomous entity through her multiple personae. The freedom that can be found in obscuring the established parameters of gender performance raises a question as to what extent the player is supposed to be in control of what happens in the gameplay, especially when the essence of the character is at stake. This crucial question needs to be addressed in tandem with how much the game depends on the player's knowledge of the book or, even more profoundly, of Sackville-West's life. Before addressing the central question as to what sort of control the player has over the currency of the game, it is useful to go through a composite sketch of player character personality.

Early on when the vision of the game was established, there was a myriad of options for the player's game-world surrogate. That Woolf makes Orlando an elusive, indefinable subject sets the stage for the game's aesthetic innovation and experimentation on the player agency in ways that allow a journey of personal development. While Orlando's complex personality remains decidedly undefined, Woolf vividly describes the titular character's physical appearance. In the excerpt below, for example, Orlando is portrayed as a charming young boy of the Elizabethan period:

> The red of the cheeks was covered with peach down; the down on the lips was only a little thicker than the down on the cheeks. The lips themselves were short and slightly drawn back over teeth of an exquisite and almond whiteness. Nothing disturbed the arrowy nose in its short, tense flight; the hair was dark, the ears small, and fitted closely to the head. But, alas, that these catalogues of youthful beauty cannot end without mentioning forehead and eyes (Woolf, 1928/2014).

In the game this was roughly envisioned as an androgynous puppet figure with a distinctive look. The character is seen through the third-person perspective as a young man of slim build. He is dressed in sombre shades of grey and black. A dark grey shirt fits closely to the body and the slender arms and the breeches are worn at the knee over black stockings. A scarf and a black skirt-like layer worn on top of the breeches is an ostentatious display of hermaphrodite qualities. He has soft curly dark hair growth to his chin with a thin hanging lock of hair dangling by his cheek. The puppet feature symbolises the way Orlando gets caught up in the confinement of physical form and prescribed social identity. As

part of the experiment, I tried animating the character.[10] This is a major phase in the animation and character design in a process called rigging whereby the bone structure of a 3D model is created (see Figure 1).

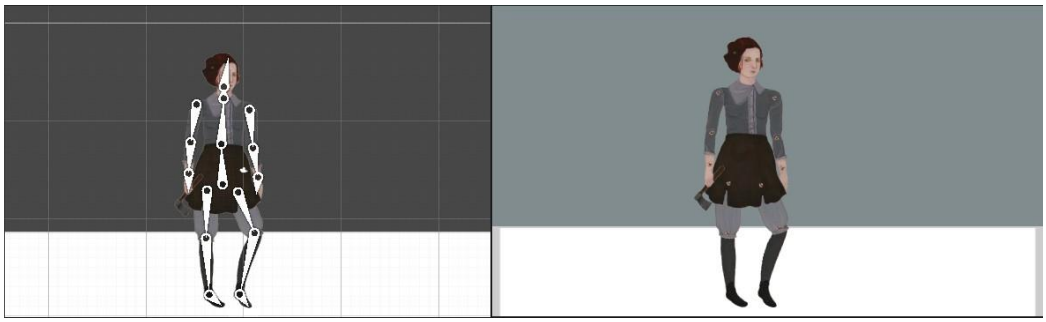

Figure 1: The first image of Orlando in the process of rigging.

As manifested in Figure 1, my first sketch strove to materialise the book's portrayal of the young Orlando. This would affect how the game positions itself in relation to the source text insofar as it undermined the aesthetic of the adaptation. Where the game adaptation holds most tightly to the book, it impedes a relevant configuration. For that reason, the problem lies less with departing from the novel than with attempting to be more like it. Given that the character of Orlando was conceptualised from the start to be something not merely a pastiche of Woolf's gender non-conforming hero(ine), the initial design did not represent my feelings on the subject accurately. At one point the game you are working on seems to captivate your imagination.

Over the course of developing this project, I have been seeking to represent the maverick character of Orlando more symbolically; by the same token, queerness is handled in a more conceptual register than featuring gender-bending characters.[11] Taking the constraints and the scope of my game into account, I meditated on what are the minimum qualities necessary for the portrayal of my character and returned to my sketch with a different approach. Part of the change in direction also arose from my play experience of two games I was exploring as part of the research, *Thomas was Alone* (2012) and *11:45 A Vivid Life* (2018). The former is a critically acclaimed platformer in which players have to control a group of sentient rectangles through a series of obstacles in order to progress (see Figure 2), while the latter is a sci-fi narrative

[10] In the game design phase I set up a small development team which included a programmer who oversaw the rendering of the game. Together we worked within a limited budget.

[11] See more Ruberg (2020).

telling the story of a girl who feels at odds with her own body and steals an x-ray machine to investigate it.

Figure 2: *Thomas was Alone* (2012), a critically acclaimed platformer in which players have to control a group of sentient quadrilateral figures (Smith, 2021).

Although being operated with completely different game mechanics, both are simplistic in their style. Through its clever internal monologue *Thomas* elevates the simplest cast of coloured rectangles, whose goal is to get to a portal, to something totally engrossing. In *Vivid Life* a simple click on each of the dialogue options, one by one, carries the player through different endings to the story based on their choices made during the game. Having minimalism lie at the core of game design, both games manage to communicate a very serious, thought-provoking message about friendship and identity crisis respectively. Thanks to, if not in spite of, the economical design, the sense of immersion the player gets from playing the game is tremendous. I drew from these two games the enforced simplicity that sets the characters in motion. Just like those basic shapes in *Thomas* cannot simply be taken as severe limitations on the interactive display, one must not denigrate the primitive graphics of 2D pixel-based design in *Vivid Life.*

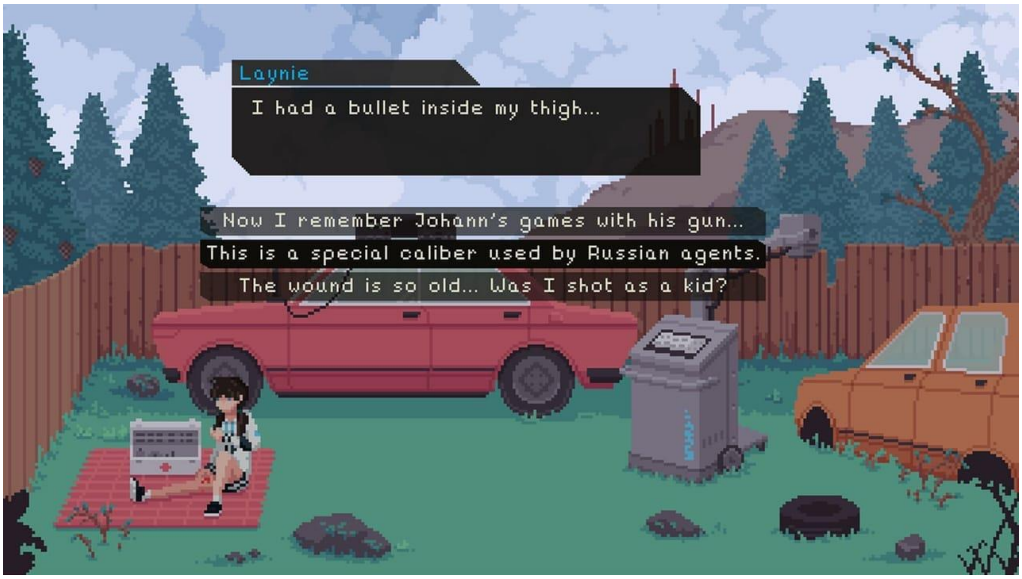

Figure 3: *11:45 A Vivid Life* (2018), a sci-fi narrative telling the story of a girl who feels at odds with her own body and steals an x-ray machine to investigate it (Bower, 2018).

Instead of a human figure, the upshot is greatly simplified into an anthropomorphic 3D triangular prism with a pair of slim legs, a tremendous break from what is depicted in the book (see Figure 4). The player character is a playful deconstruction of the body that invites interpretation. Comprising 2D shapes of rectangles and triangles, from one side it can be seen as a triangular shape, and rectangular from the other. Players can rotate the shape interactively by spinning it as they look for the right angle. The prototype shows the character in a plain colour but in the gameplay players are offered a wide range of colour options as the game progresses.

It is important to note that far from reinforcing heteronormativity the different shapes do not necessarily represent any specific gender. Instead, the supposedly deceptive triangle offers another version of embodiment that does not just equivocate about its own placement on a binary gender scale. Such a "many-sided" challenge to dualistic modes and paradigms (masculine/feminine, triangle/rectangle, 2D/3D, inside/outside etc.) is a good deal more complicated than the logic of binary thinking accounts for. The player's self-conscious play with different shapes, forms and colours reflects acutely how Woolf ludically puts Orlando at various flexible points on a continuum.

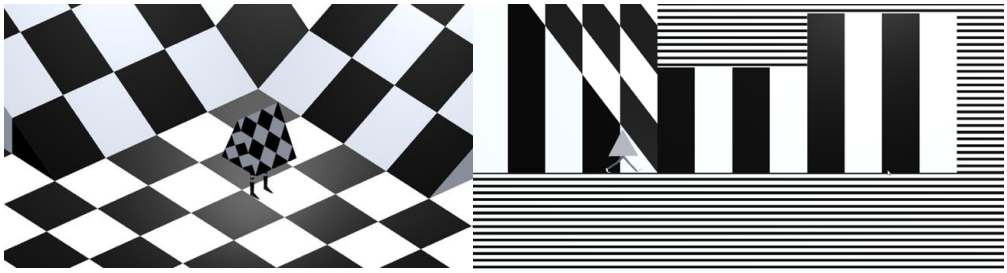

Figure 4: The prototype of Orlando, an anthropomorphic 3D triangular prism with a pair of slim legs against the 3D and 2D backdrop

The simple geometric properties of the character add a lot of depth to the gameplay in ways that also maintain a state of liminality which allows Orlando to master his/her multiple personae. Take one of the scenes in which Orlando is described in a playing-dress-up game.

> So then one may sketch her spending her morning in a China robe of ambiguous gender among her books; then receiving a client or two (for she had many scores of suppliants) in the same garment; then she would take a turn in the garden and clip the nut trees—for which knee-breeches were convenient, then she would change into a flowered taffeta which best suited a drive to Richmond and a proposal of marriage from a great nobleman, and so back again to town, where she would don a snuff-coloured gown like a lawyer's and visit the courts to hear how her cases were doing...when night came, she would more often than not become a nobleman complete from head to toe and walk the streets in search of adventure (Woolf 1928/2014).

In the game this is translated into players needing to find out how the geometric shape best fits in the backdrop. At more advanced levels players can unlock more colours and optimize the camouflage. This feature allows players to unpack the dynamic interplay between the two different worlds of the 2D and 3D, which turns their adventure into allegories of Orlando's.

My final configuration of the player-character fortuitously echoes game designer Richard Rouse's (2005) rule of thumb. 'The players' character', he remarks, 'should be sufficiently amorphous and unformed that players can think of that character in whatever way they see fit'. While Rouse's statement may be true for game designing in general, I wonder how much it resonates with novel-to-game adaptation, at least with this particular project, whereby the creative agenda and the desire to keep the aura of the original work intact are inextricably intertwined. I worked around this issue by keeping the character to a bare minimum, hoping to encourage players to exert their agency and identify

with the character. I am certainly not saying, however, that going into exuberant detail will always inhibit the player's imagination. But for my game project, as I see it, the character functions perfectly without them. Indeed, it is a rather subjective question of what is most important about the game or what the game is trying to accomplish.

From the character design one should get the sense that the Orlando game I am envisioning is decidedly experimental. Offering the player nothing more than a few essentials and a basic form to hold on to, the diegetic game world leaves a decent amount of room for players to project themselves onto the game-world surrogate. Simultaneously, it echoes the supple interplay between inadequacy and excess manifested in Woolf's ridiculing the pomposity of the pageantry, the house of three hundred and sixty-five bedrooms, Orlando's lack of vocabulary to express himself, the verbose metabiographer who insufficiently demonstrates narratorial authority and so on.[12] The challenge, then, is how to make the game transcend a reductive reading of puzzle-solving as a diluted adaptation of literature as it moves more into the abstract realm. The following section will give a better sense of how the gameplay operates. More specifically, I will discuss the central conceit that streamlines the design of the entire game.

The core game mechanics and central conceit

When the project was in its infancy, options came up on what sort of game the player would be playing. The possibilities included mainstream video game tropes such as a side-scroller, a first-person shooter, an adventure or a role-playing game, etc. Essentially, it was a question of whether we had, to borrow from Rouse, 'a firm grasp on what makes it fun' (Rouse, 2005, p. 294). So much of implementing a game design relies on this question. Who would set out to create a game that no one wants to play? Even though the Orlando game project is conceived as part of my experimentation on a more active approach to adaptation, the game itself should live up to its potential as a form of entertainment.

As demonstrated in the preceding section, it is all too easy to lose track of what is central to your vision when you are preoccupied with mirroring the narrative and literary style of the source text. As a caveat, Trevor Elkington, examining movie-based games generally faced with a hostile critical reception, listed three main characteristics of game adaptations that are potentially 'self-defeating': 'shallow, unchallenging gameplay, mediocre graphics, and a narrative based directly on film events'. Elkington moved on to argue that the

[12] One of the concrete examples of a sense of inadequacy reverberating in the novel is when male Orlando as an aspiring poet 'ransack[ed] the language' to describe a Russian princess Sasha (modeled on Violet Trefusis, Sackville-West's lover) simply to find that 'words failed him'. See Woolf (2014, p. 24).

heavy reliance on the film narrative and cinematic conventions can be seriously detrimental to the adaptation and the source alike as reviewers find both 'manage to sacrifice the strength of their own medium without realising the strengths of the other'(Elkington, 2009, pp. 219-220). There is something of the cautionary tale in these 'negative synergies' that illuminates the needful distance between the "original" text and the game adaptation. As I continued to explore the possibilities of creating a game as a logical product of Woolf's work, I delved into the more experimental area of game design. My attempt to transpose the narrative of *Orlando* into another mode of storytelling and experience operated under the logic that the craft of game mechanics is complementary to, if not outweighed by, the meaningful message. Putting together what can be intrinsic parts of the game, I sketched out the game focus as follows.

> *Orlando: An Adaptation* is a role-playing and puzzle hybrid game adapted from Virginia Woolf's fantasy novel *Orlando: A Biography* (1928).[13] The game captures the essence of the book's witty satire of the exhaustive sexual and social mores as players are carried through the story. Throughout, the tone is light and ludic. The graphics are remarkably abstract. In a manner reminiscent of a toddler's game of fitting objects into apertures, the player is required to rotate the object using cues to plan the action. The player's main source of conflict is the 2D background environment within which the 3D triangle-shaped surrogate must fit to progress. The 2D world provides the player with the quest in which she is assigned a certain task (fitting in the environment). In order to complete the mission, the player has to switch to the 3D mode that allows a non-restricted view of the world. The 3D space reveals crucial clues about a particular campaign, while it conceptually represents the multiplicity of Orlando's personality. Some level of interactivity is also achieved through the conversations with other characters as they unfold how to complete of the game challenges. At more advanced levels more colours for the shape can be unlocked.

[13] The game's working title calls into play the novel's decidedly confusing subtitle, *A Biography*. When the book was first brought out booksellers refused to shelve *Orlando* as fiction but placed it with 'real' biographies, resulting in the relatively low advance sales. To her frustration Woolf admitted there was 'a high price to pay' for the facile stunt. Through its title the game proclaims itself to be an adaptation, although elements of puzzle-solving undeniably take precedence in the game's character. By making an undue effort to suggest otherwise I aim to emulate Woolf's ludic play with literary categorisation. While the title is something of an extended joke, it engages in an ongoing dialogue about definitions of adaptation.

Fleshing out the focus, I situated the enigmatic figure of the triangular prism against the 2D backdrop in order to foreground the limitations of the rigid shapes and to highlight the character's contrasting potential to flip sides as a way of circumventing the system. While performing the fitting action in a prospective way, players see how the 2-dimensional aperture is related to the 3-dimensional object. However, the whimsical rotation hitherto is counterbalanced by the restrictive nature of a puzzle-solving platformer. To elaborate, the tendency inherent in puzzle-solving games, whereby players generally only have one way to proceed, appears to remove a degree of interactivity. In the light of the play experience, there is a plethora of minimal action games that rely on the direct manipulation of onscreen non-representational objects. As a result, they have missed out on the significant potential of, to borrow from game researcher Lars Konzack, 'present[ing] a vision of the world'.[14] For example, in *Super Hexagon* (2012) the player's experience revolves around rotating a triangle around a spinning hexagon without touching the moving walls while racing towards the centre (see figure 5). Although the pulsating game actively invites players to exert their agency to a great extent, the fact that it has only one solution somehow limits the players' interactive experience. As such, the game provides no meaningful choices for players to make. As one player critically reviewed, "As others have said, this is not a deep game. There is no storyline. It's difficult. Most games will last only a matter of seconds to minutes" (Dougcrozier, 2014). The case of *Super Hexagon* provided me with the chance to reflect on the extending scope of challenges from how to create engaging experiences to how to integrate philosophical thinking into a game system.

Upon this premise I have established rational relations to the elements of methodical puzzle-solving of the game. I have explored mechanical features that will elicit particular types of emotion. With a view to offering a broader spectrum of play experience I have decided to add to the game incremental character development. In this sense, the nascent gameplay will also be beset by the character's emotions that vary significantly on each encounter with events, agents or props—the environmental objects with which they interact. With the added feature of narrative emotion a successful solution to the game is derived not only from spatial cognition but also from digesting and synthesising emotional temperament of the character they are playing. Players know what passes through the character's mind both through the facetious narrator whose words in the novel will be replaced by the voiceover and the game interface that displays the character's verbal thinking and emoting. During the gameplay players witness the ebb and flow of the character's emotion gauge filled with variables of positive and negative emotions. Once a certain type of emotion reaches a specific threshold the character is rewarded with a new tool-object that

[14] See more Konzack (2009).

gives it a new capability.[15] For further experiment I plan to incorporate text strings that express different potential directions for the character's thoughts into the narrative emotion.

With this feature the gameplay grows less intuitive as the player is compelled by a visceral logic. However, this should not be taken as something that alienates the player. On the contrary, the player is asked to be a part of this philosophical experiment and psychological exploration of its protagonist. Not only does this give space for a significant amount of playability in game adaptation terms and for the development of scenarios and levels, it also offers a major opportunity for the game developer to expand on the expressive capacity of the medium.

The various challenges and constraints related to the character design and core game mechanics I have discussed thus far illuminates, rather than inhibits, the possibility of adapting Woolf's *Orlando* into a videogame that echoes the spirit of the book. Although it is far beyond the scope of this study, several aspects of game design (for instance, the play flow, the look and feel and the implementation of the game etc.) need further discussion. Operating as research through practice this study has opened up considerable possibilities to grapple with the issue of the "untranslatable" that may have pre-empted an adaptation attempt. In the light of adaptation studies, it has reconfigured the relationship between adaptation theory and adaptation practice in ways that allow more reciprocal exchange and learning. As such, it has provided the foundation for ongoing and future projects which, I hope, will find their way towards those ends.

Figure 5: The rendering of graphics and the simulation of physics. Scan the QR code to get a glimpse of the game.

[15] Within the scope of this article, I restrict the discussion to only a few glimpses of the potential gameplay. Evidently, a rich and detailed discussion of the emotional logic of the game and the incremental character development is needed and deserves its own chapter.

Conclusion

What is the potential for a game adaptation of a fantasy novel that breaks through the established order in the mutually constitutive domains of literature and gender? This question I have hazarded an answer to through practice and then through a retrospective analysis of the process from conceptualising to developing a specific design and aesthetic. Conceived as an adaptation of Woolf's prose, some people may see this game project as strictly targeting fans of the novel but I would suggest that there is a more ingenious aspect to the adaptation than that. The medium of videogame provides the forum for both creative and aesthetic activity in a much broader sense. Turning to making a video game as an experimental approach to adaptation studies, this project takes a step forward from the existing literature on novel-to videogame adaptation. Methodologically, I have explored a series of adaptations that are related to Woolf's *Orlando* in various aspects and surveyed current studies on novel-based games. As I started to work in a manageable design space, I drew my inspiration from a few games in terms of technical specifications and design ideas. Throughout my development of the adaptation, I have been seeking to break away from the limited discipline that tends to view literary film adaptations as literary translations and have explored the game in its own form and with its own potential. The resultant output is more than meets the eye.

Orlando's incarnation in the game is writ large reduced to a triangular prism. Despite the rigid lines and symmetrically constructed patterns that are implicitly gendered, the non-representational abstract shape offers the realm of possibilities in many aspects. For one thing, the central theme that arises in the distillation of Orlando evokes the notion of a *Doppelgänger*, an agent with double entities. Rather than an individual with a split personality, the character design encompasses multiple signs of both entities (femininity and masculinity, triangle and rectangle, 2D and 3D etc.) being simultaneously at play. This at once it undermines the idea that gender identities are separate and fixed opposites. The minimalist geometric shape brings with it some level of authenticity, while still capturing Woolf's resistance to any form of absolutes. Nevertheless, as far as this game is concerned, the issue lies in Orlando's constituting and articulating of his/her identity, as she avails herself of physical markers that keep gender order by distinguishing one sex from the other. In other words, Orlando's trope of cross-dressing creates an ambivalent relationship between the protagonist and sexual/social mores. That is, in the process through which she attains a certain state of freedom by means of outward appearance, her exulting in the spree of sexual ambivalence and sartorial play can be read simultaneously as perpetuating and as subverting the very order that provides the maverick hero/ine a resource. The challenge, then, is to find ways to render the player-surrogate that epitomise such tensions. As a possible solution, I integrated emotional logic into the incremental character

development. Such a highly codified mechanism requires further exploration than I have done in this study.

Beyond the creation of a videogame adaptation specifically, my novel/videogame convergence experience is somewhat similar to that of Woolf's transforming of Sackville-West's story in *Orlando*. Just as Woolf envisioned *Orlando* as 'an escapade' and 'great fun to write' but came out of it with something of a self-reflection, I gained from this project an insight into the practice of adaptation, alongside the pleasure of traversing into an unfamiliar domain— the progressive medium of videogames (Woolf, 1954/2003, p. 104). In addition to the general intrigue and exciting opportunities attached to the thought experiment of adapting *Orlando* into a videogame, I also came to this project with a particular interest in contemplating the emotive and formal capacities of interactive media. In sum, the project serves as an illustration of how the conceptual mechanics of the source text work in practice. By considering the 'meaning' of adaptation, it becomes self-evident that that the experience itself is the goal. This feasibility study is but the first step in a work in progress and remains open to revision and extensive future study.

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