Text Adventures: how Twine remade gaming

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In the video game *Howling Dogs*, released in 2012, players wake up in a prison with few options: a shower, a nutrient dispenser, a garbage chute, and a recreation room with a virtual reality headset. For the first few clicks, all you can do is navigate the prison: getting your nutrient bar, cleaning up, examining a photograph by your bed. Then you put on the headset, and you're thrown into a world of strange, vivid imagery. You live out a strange snapshot life before being thrown back to the same tiny room. You click through the same motions again and again, each time visiting a different world, as sparklingly strange as the prison is dull.

This was Porpentine Charity Heartscape's *Howling Dogs*: a poem, a game, and many people's first introduction to an idiosyncratic piece of free software called Twine. It was — and still is — one of the easiest ways to start making games.

An open-source program that produces web-based interactive fiction, Twine can create branching stories simply by putting brackets around words. But the tool is also nearly as flexible as the web itself. Since its release in 2009, it's helped create a new kind of interactive art – strange, small, lyrical, and often way outside the world of commercial gaming.

Porpentine followed up with other surreal worlds – where raw intimacy and hints of nostalgia collided with violent, nightmarish cavalcades of trash and sex. *Cyberqueen* spun out the messy psychosexual undertones of the '90s *System Shock* series, drowning a stock first-person shooter premise in slime and bodily fluids. *Cry$tal Warrior Ke$ha* sparkled like a glitter-strewn Tumblr post and turned the "Tik Tok" singer into an otherworldly avenging feminine entity. *Ultra Business Tycoon III* is an absurdist parody of a '90s business simulation game, until its fourth wall cracks to reveal a melancholy parallel narrative. Her writing was simultaneously incredibly personal and transcendently detached from reality, and Twine shaped it into something that felt like a space to explore rather than words on a screen.

In an industry obsessed with photorealistic graphics, focus-tested gameplay, and ever-evolving open worlds, Twine's simplicity felt liberating. It imbued games with the DIY spirit of homemade zines, many of them weirder, sharper, and queerer than their mainstream counterparts. According to some of its biggest fans, Twine was nothing short of a revolution.

The reality was a lot more complicated and less utopian – but it would still help reinvent a medium.

"Mostly, video games are about men shooting men in the face"

The Twine editor looks like an architect's drafting table crossed with a conspiracy chart. Users start by creating a

“passage,” or a simple text field, that can be linked to new passages. When you’re done with the story, you “publish” it as a single web file, which you can load in any ordinary browser.

But Twine is much more than a branching choice simulator. It’s an open-ended system for making almost any kind of game with text, with a scripting language that lets authors determine how each word appears on a page. Twine encourages writing with a crude, hand-coded look, but a meticulous control of rhythm. Passages can make readers wait for agonizing seconds until a single word appears, or they can drop a wall of forking hyperlink paths in an instant.

If it sounds like a blogging platform, that’s because it was — at least at first.

In the late 2000s, Twine’s creator, Chris Klimas, was a full-time programmer and part-time student at the University of Baltimore, slowly eking out a graduate degree in interactive design. Klimas was inspired by old-school text games like *Zork*, but when he started building his own games, he was frustrated by their puzzle-heavy conventions. So he started looking for his own storytelling system and ended up building one on top of TiddlyWiki — a “non-linear blog analogue” designed by programmer Jeremy Ruston.

Twine — and Twee, the language Klimas wrote to underpin it — wasn’t, fundamentally, a new idea. Authors in the 1990s had experimented with digital hypertext fiction, creating multi-threaded novels through websites or programs like Apple’s HyperCard. But at the time, Klimas wasn’t familiar with hypertext. His software also had two big advantages: it could be used with very little practice, and to play the resulting games, all you needed was a web browser.

Klimas started using Twine to write short fiction and personal essays. One of his first pieces was about experiencing syncope — a dreamlike, almost hallucinogenic fainting spell brought on

by stress. The episode had sent him to the hospital, and he wanted to convey it in a way that readers could explore at their own pace. “That story was me trying to talk through what happened there and what that experience was like,” he says. “Just sort of saying, like – this is this experience that happened to me, and what happened afterwards.”

Unfortunately, other writers weren’t nearly as compelled. “I was trying really hard at the time to get writers interested in it. I was like, ‘Hey, writers! You know, like, you like writing stories. Maybe you’d like making an *interactive* story!’” he says. “There was sort of a small community. But for about a year, I think it didn’t really go anywhere.”

After a couple of years, Klimas was nearly ready to write Twine off. It was tough to even gauge the program’s impact since it produced tiny files that people hosted on personal websites or even storage services like Dropbox. “I had kind of moved on,” he says. But slowly, he realized he was getting bug reports from people he’d never met – asking him to fix a tool he wasn’t sure anybody used. And he saw an article in *The Guardian* with a proclamation: the Twine revolution had arrived.

Klimas had designed Twine from within the small world of interactive fiction. His community revered classic text-based adventure games, and they often scorned newer and visually splashier successors. “It was like, text adventures are a cut above ‘video games.’ These are *serious things*,” he describes it now. “We were a little bit self-serious.”

What he’d discovered was weirder – and quite a bit lewder – than he’d expected. *The Guardian* had interviewed game developer Anna Anthropy, known for the BDSM-themed platformer *Mighty Jill Off,* as well as the short and personal *Dys4ia*, about her experience with gender dysphoria. Anthropy was also the author of a book called *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, which urged people to express themselves with simple do-it-

yourself games.

Many now-legendary games were built by one or two core developers. And tools like HyperCard and Adobe Flash — as well as *Doom* and other moddable games — turned millions of ordinary people into amateur game designers. But when *Zinesters* was published in 2012, the term "video game" evoked glossy action franchises like *BioShock* and *Gears of War*. "Mostly, video games are about men shooting men in the face," Anthropy wrote. "I have to strain to find any game that's about a queer woman, to find any game that resembles my own experience."

Like Klimas himself, Anthropy started using Twine as an alternative to complicated text adventure tools. "I was trying to find something I could use to make choice-based stories," she recalls. "Twine was the least bad."

Her first story adapted a world from *ZZT* — an iconic 1991 shareware game from Tim Sweeney, now the CEO of Epic Games, the studio behind *Fortnite*. Soon, she was giving Twine workshops and promoting it as one of the most affordable, approachable ways to make games.

Mainstream gaming had become sclerotic and timid, Anthropy contended. Studios relied on hundred-person teams with multimillion-dollar budgets, reworking old ideas that they knew would sell. "Mainstream games are really depersonalized. They don't really tell us a lot about the human condition," Anthropy told *Guardian* writer Cara Ellison. "What I want to see more of in games is the personal — games that speak to me as a human being, that are relatable."

Anthropy wasn't the only person saying this. The year she published *Zinesters*, *The Atlantic* feted Jonathan Blow — developer of the hit indie game *Braid* — as a disgruntled "maverick" who might finally "establish the video game as an art form." But Blow was still a professional programmer who spent $200,000 painstakingly crafting *Braid*. Anthropy was

interested in people with far less money and little formal training, using off-the-shelf tools like GameMaker and Twine.

At first, Klimas didn't know what to make of this new community. "I kind of came into it sideways," he says. "It sort of percolated through to me – like, this is people really doing interesting things with Twine."

In the years after Twine's launch, it had expanded beyond those original TiddlyWiki snippets. Twine stories were ultimately web pages, and designers started adding images, sound, and JavaScript or CSS snippets that produced new special effects. Some shared their work online – like Leon Arnott, one of the key architects of Twine.

Arnott's code snippets played with how words appeared on a page. "Most of the features my code provided were to add dynamic changes to text within a single passage," he says. A cycling hyperlink, for instance, would simply change from one word to another as you clicked it. A timed remove could erase words if a player spent too long reading a passage. Some ideas were Arnott's own invention, and some were features other writers had come up with but had struggled to create with Twine's core feature set.

As Klimas kept building Twine's open-source editor, he gave Arnott free rein of its default scripting language, Harlowe, cementing the idea that Twine was about playing with words and timing, not just choices.

A Choose Your Own Adventure book might spell out readers' options, but they can read the book at any pace in any order. Twine games – even ones mostly based around branching narratives – can compromise that sense of control. In Anthropy's *Queers in Love at the End of the World*, for example, your unnamed protagonist is facing the apocalypse. You pick an option for one last moment with your lover: kiss her, hold her, tell her you love her. How do you kiss her?

Hungrily? Softly? Fiercely? What do you tell her afterwards? You keep clicking, scanning the text for more options. But at the end of a 10-second timer, each game ends with the same text: *Everything is wiped away.*

It represented everything the stereotypical gamer despised

The "Twine revolution" wasn't simply about non-programmers making games. Twine offered a home for people who felt alienated from the larger industry, particularly historically marginalized designers. "Twine is this amazing queer and woman-orientated game-making community that didn't even exist a year ago," Anthropy told *The Guardian*.

And if you found an intriguing Twine game, the tools for building your own were just a few clicks away. After interviewing Anthropy, Cara Ellison found herself thinking about the kind of design that Twine encouraged. "The more I thought about the rhythmic nature and the poetic nature of Twine – placing words on the page so that your eyes would fall to the right kind of part of the sentence at the time that you wanted – the more I thought, well, that's quite sensual and a little bit sexual," she says. So she began work on *Sacrilege*, a melancholy story about romantic encounters at a nightclub. The short game struck such a chord that, when a bug cropped up years after its publication, a devoted fan discovered and repaired it. That fan has maintained the game ever since.

Twine's rise overlapped with a bigger shift toward games that told stories about real-world experiences or social marginalization. An NPR article dubbed the genre "empathy games": nonviolent, often mundane projects that tried to convey human struggles through rules and virtual spaces. Many of these projects were tiny, but some became breakout hits – like the exploration game *Gone Home*, which sold 50,000 copies

in its first month.

Some Twine projects earned praise from the broader industry. In 2013, *Howling Dogs* made a surprise appearance at the Independent Games Festival, where grand prize winner Richard Hofmeier spraypainted its name over the booth for his own game *Cart Life*, telling them to play *Howling Dogs* instead. Hofmeier described its effect as a kind of "holy dread."

But Twine writers were more likely to ridicule the gaming world's excesses than seek its approval. Author Michael Lutz created a comically literal *Call of Duty* adaptation called *Tower of the Blood Lord*, complete with a fake text-based online multiplayer and buttons for crouching and jumping. He said he'd only played 20 minutes of the real game, though — so the multiplayer mode is a food stand simulator, the "campaign" lets you swallow your commanding officer whole instead of selecting a weapon, and the story involves talking animals and questions about personal identity and the nature of fiction.

Conversely, *The Writer Will Do Something* is an unsparingly unromantic farce about big-budget game-making. Players join the production team of troubled franchise *ShatterGate*, where they navigate byzantine internal politics, impossible player expectations, and a dictionary's worth of pretentious buzzwords. The game was created by Matthew S. Burns and Tom Bissell — who based it on real experience working on *Call of Duty, Halo*, and *Gears of War*.

Even when they weren't explicitly poking fun at traditional video games, Twine authors toyed with players' mechanical expectations. Tom McHenry's *Horse Master* is nominally about buying, rearing, and training a horse for a competition. But your horse's carefully managed stats — "uncanny," "realness," "pep," and other strange descriptors — aren't actually what's being measured.

For that matter, a "horse" probably isn't what you think it

is. Because Twine games also often exploit writing's power to casually suggest unsettling mental images or intriguingly confusing commands — something that graphical video games simply can't do. In another game, your central power is the option to "unleash rat chaos." What *is* rat chaos, exactly? Players can only guess.

The sublime fever dream of *Howling Dogs* helped put Twine on the games industry's radar. But it attracted mainstream attention through a very different project called *Depression Quest.*

Depression Quest is a deliberately unexciting "choose your own adventure" story. You're a normal 20-something person trying to get by at work, get along with your girlfriend, and work on a passion project in your free time. Unfortunately, you're also deeply depressed, so your brain won't let you do this. Each day gives you a healthy path forward: order some food in the evening, go hang out with a friend, talk to people at a party. These options are crossed out, leaving behind choices like procrastination, long nights alone, and awkward silence.

Depression Quest — created by Zoe Quinn, Patrick Lindsey, and Isaac Schankler — earned positive mentions in outlets like *Rock Paper Shotgun*, as well as an official exhibition slot at the Indiecade festival. Like a lot of so-called "empathy games," it used rules to convey the feeling of being limited and powerless, rather than omnipotent and unstoppable. (Eventually, your life *can* take a turn for the better, but only with some concerted work.)

But in 2014, a year after *Depression Quest's* release, Quinn's ex-partner published a rambling diatribe and urged a mob of internet trolls to harass them. The accusations included an unfounded claim that Quinn had an affair with a journalist to promote *Depression Quest*. And the movement — soon dubbed Gamergate — tarred Twine itself as the tool of an "anti-gamer" cabal. It represented everything the stereotypical gamer

despised: terrible graphics, unapologetically rough edges, and experiences that poked fun at macho fantasies.

Klimas remembers being integrated into the edges of Gamergate's sprawling conspiracy theory — which included many journalism outlets; the creators of nonviolent and LGBT-themed games like *Gone Home*; and somewhat paradoxically, the Pentagon's experimental research wing DARPA. He wrote to friends in academia, warning them that Gamergaters had dug up their names as well. But mostly, he was bemused by people who complained that "any idiot" could make a Twine game. "I'm like, congratulations, you understand now!" he says. "Any idiot can pick up a pencil as well. The prejudice related to computational complexity — like if a tool is complicated to learn, it must be better — I completely disagree with."

As Klimas readily admits, his experience was very different from Gamergate's primary targets. Quinn — as well as others like cultural critic Anita Sarkeesian and developer Brianna Wu — were accused of bizarre moral infractions and driven from their homes by threats. The movement painted critics of sexist or transphobic cliches as greedy criminal insurgents attacking defenseless big-budget studios, rather than tiny communities who put most of their work online for free.

Gamergate's influence resonated across mainstream politics. The movement bolstered the careers of right-wing outrage merchants like Milo Yiannopoulos, who would later help promote the white nationalist "alt-right." It fueled the growth of anonymous forum 8chan, which became a base of operations for the violent QAnon conspiracy movement. The controversy also forced companies and news outlets to reckon with much broader, older online harassment problems. Ultimately, many Gamergate supporters probably weren't *that* passionate about niche game design software. But they saw ammunition for an endless, ever-evolving culture war — one that continues to this day.

“It manages to essentially teach you how to write well for video games”

Meanwhile, the “Twine revolution” was more fragile than it looked.

Within a few years, the term “empathy game” turned from a straight-faced description to a wry, bitter joke. To critics, the phrase implied queer or non-white game developers were attempting to explain themselves to outsiders, and that playing a 10-minute game was equivalent to living under oppression. Anthropy balked when people described *Dys4ia* as a way to safely understand being a trans woman. In 2015, she produced an art installation called *Empathy Game* that was simply a pair of her old shoes and a pedometer — making fun of the idea that players were literally “walking a mile in her shoes.”

A game could lay out someone’s personal experience, or it could help explain social systems that were often invisible. But simply *knowing* about that system wouldn’t necessarily spur people to change it. Awareness, it turned out, wasn’t a substitute for action.

Expressing vulnerability online felt increasingly fraught. Developer Merritt K, who had created games about BDSM and sex, took much of her old work offline after Gamergate. “A lot of it felt personal in a way that I was uncomfortable with,” she told *The Creative Independent*. “Not that those kinds of things didn’t happen before, but being personal online was a much more dangerous proposition after that for a lot of people.”

Twine itself wasn’t quite as simple and universal as mainstream coverage of it suggested. The tool’s interface and scripting languages were designed for writers who spoke English and understood the conventions of branching storytelling. Learning its more complex features requires

sifting through a now-dormant Twine wiki, a still-active Twine "cookbook," and myriad help threads across multiple forums. Publishing a story requires a basic understanding of web hosting or storefronts like Itch.io. It's easier than many professional design tools but doesn't have the radical simplicity of a stapled-together zine.

This tension had existed for years. Back in 2014, Dan Cox — who authored some of the most comprehensive Twine guides — denounced what he dubbed the "lie" that Twine didn't require programming. "Twine has never been free of code and never will be," Cox wrote. Today, a wide array of Twine script re-creates or integrates other languages like JavaScript or CSS.

Unfortunately, Twine *also* doesn't work well for big and highly complex projects. Passages start to freeze up if you type too much text in them, and if you're developing a game with another person, it's easy to accidentally overwrite their work. Klimas maintains the Twine editor alongside a full-time job, funded by a Patreon campaign that earns up to roughly $1,400 a month. It works remarkably well for such a small project, but it's not as full-featured as commercial software or a massive open-source collaboration.

Some Twine supporters have drifted away from the medium. Porpentine had begun working outside Twine soon after *Howling Dogs*, and in 2017, she distanced herself from other queer developers who had fostered Twine, publishing an essay that accused unnamed community members of abuse. When I contacted her, she described the essay as her farewell to any coherent Twine community. "Twine is pretty old now, and kind of died as a communal thing," she wrote in an email.

Over time, the online landscape for Twine has changed. Many older games were posted on Philomela — a simple hosting platform created by programmer Colin Marc. "At that time, a lot of Twine games were hosted on Dropbox, which obviously sucked," Marc says. "The site was a way for me to be involved

and helpful." (He also attributes it to a "pretty embarrassing desire to be friends with all the cool game dev people I followed on Twitter.") But over the years, Marc drifted away from Twine, and the internet in general.

"My honest appraisal of Twine is that although it is really useful if you have no technical expertise, it is actually quite constricting," he says now. "There have been really clever, interesting things done with Twine, but they were done by people working around the limitations of the tool." Marc realized that Twine might never have a breakout moment, the way *Gone Home* had sold mainstream audiences on exploration games. In 2019, he set off on a year-long travel expedition with limited internet service, and he decided to pull the plug on Philomela — moving its existing games to Google Cloud Storage and retiring one of Twine's original hubs.

More than a decade after its creation, Klimas's work remains a significant force in gaming and interactive fiction. Browse the Twine tag on the Itch.io storefront, and you'll find a steady stream of new titles — even if the "popular" tab includes a lot of games created years ago.

Many designers use Twine or Twee to prototype branching narratives they'll adapt for other platforms, including *Black Mirror* creator Charlie Brooker, who worked with Twine for the interactive special *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*. University instructors use Twine to help students learn game design basics before they start working with general-purpose tools. Even without a unified community, Twine still serves its original purpose: to give people an easy framework for imagining nonlinear stories, whatever form those stories ultimately take.

Twine has helped inspire other software. The platform influenced Yarn Spinner, for instance — the branching dialogue tool used in award-winning indie adventure game *Night in the Woods.* "Ironically, I think a lot of Twine's influence since

2013 has been in the form of tools derived from it," says Arnott.

It's also still evolving. Klimas is currently developing a Harlowe alternative called Chapbook, and while Twine remains open-source, he helped design a proprietary tool for porting stories to iOS – and released his first game with it, *Night in the Unpleasant Hous□e*, last year. During the pandemic, Arnott decided to overhaul Harlowe with new features and fuller customization options, releasing what he calls the first "full" version of the tool in January. "I feel like Harlowe is currently in a state of stability it's never had before – my long-standing desperation to improve it has abated," he says.

While many people use Twine without any kind of support, there's an active Twine community on Discord and Reddit. It offers help with design problems and organizes Twine-focused game jams, most recently a "Valentwines Day Poetry Jam" in February.

Some Twine designers have made the leap to professional game development, fine art, or other fields. Porpentine has released numerous games alongside zines, short stories, and a Sundance Film Festival installation; in 2017, her games were exhibited at the Whitney Biennial. Ellison's *Sacrilege* led to work on the big-budget stealth game *Dishonored 2*, as well as acclaimed lo-fi shooter *Void Bastards*. "It's a really good educational tool for figuring out whether you like working in games or not," she says of Twine. "It manages to essentially teach you how to write well for video games, because it requires you to be concise and plan out how you're going to make a conversation go."

And the minimalist, white-on-black "Twine story" format instantly evokes text adventures and the early web. It's easy to convey big, abstract concepts with a gloss of absurdity – like Kris Ligman's *You Are Jeff Bezos*, where your job is simply to spend Jeff Bezos's money better than he does. Like a

pixelated *Mario Bros.*-style platformer or the camera of a first-person shooter, it offers a recognizable template for translating almost any idea into a game.

If those services shut down, players' work could be lost forever

I put my first Twine story online in 2018. I chose the platform because I had an idea for a silly pastiche of a first-person shooter series, I wanted to make it quickly, and I was an experienced writer but had no meaningful background in programming or art design. Then I got hooked on learning its scripting system and web design possibilities. A few months later, I convinced *The Verge* to publish *Wake Word*, a short game about a "helpful" AI-controlled apartment that keeps accidentally killing you. Its structure was shaped by the surreal, cyclical prison experience of *Howling Dogs*.

I've released a handful of other short games since then, all of them built in Twine. And sometimes learning its scripts first instead of "real" coding feels like it was a mistake. I usually don't make the branching narratives *or* experiential poetry Twine is best for, so I've spent a lot of time accidentally working against its constraints — like the time I wrote the start of a narrative game with a single fight scene, only to end up building a real-time word-themed combat system by forcing Twine to reload randomly selected links using dozens of overlapping timers. Still, coming incredibly late to the Twine party, I've benefited from years of forum members answering each other's remarkably complex scripting questions.

As a woman who started writing about video games a decade ago, I've benefited in less tangible ways as well. Twine's popularity helped raise the profile of several now well-known female gamemakers. There are still huge problems with misogyny

in the medium, but in 2021, I feel a lot less pressure to represent *women in games* — and more space to do what I *really* want, which is apparently making jokes about smart homes and cyberpunk tropes.

And sometimes Twine's reputation as simply a beginner's game-making system feels like a disservice. Because for all its limitations, Twine is one of the only tools custom-built for speaking the language of the web. The past several years have seen the rise of video games that mimic digital spaces, like the instant-messaging simulation *Emily Is Away* or the faux website *Mackerelmedia Fish*. At its heart, Twine is an easy way to write stories that take place in web browsers, and the more our lives play out online, the more powerful that can be.

One of the Twine jam organizers, who goes by Lee, says he grew up reading Choose Your Own Adventure books. But, "I got bored with the traditional [interactive fiction] format pretty quickly," he says. He wanted to make something that didn't feel like a branching novel, but also didn't require extensive coding or art experience. So he began making horror games inspired by phone apps, websites, and creepypasta — the short, scary stories that circulate on internet message boards.

Lee's first published game, from 2019, is *Please Answer Carefully*, which is supposedly a web survey about your screen time habits. After a few pages, though, the survey's questions start getting strangely needy. Then, the possible answers start getting a lot more sinister. The experience is short and simple, without even the branches or multiple endings many people expect of interactive fiction. But it's also very effective, slowly twisting what's supposedly a blank mirror for the player's personality.

These kinds of pseudo-software games can comment directly on the larger conditions of the internet. Mark Sample's *Content Moderator Sim* gives you an 8-hour (actually, 5-minute) shift at "ViralTitans," a fictitious content moderation contractor.

Under a relentless timer and some passive-aggressive messages from a supervisor, it dryly describes social media posts that range from distasteful to terrifying, asking you to make a call on each one. It hints at the stress and frustration of being a moderator, but it's not just a plea for empathy — it's a test of which horrors *you* will personally let slide.

In 2021, Twine's web-based design has proven surprisingly resilient. "I believe really strongly in the web," says Klimas. "Things have been moving in the wrong direction for quite a while in terms of the web as a medium for consumption, not creation. But I think the battle isn't completely over yet."

Twine is far from the only free and approachable game-making program, but its openness is still unusual. "There are more tools, but many of those tools are tightly gatekept by platform owners," Anthropy notes. "Tools like *Super Mario Maker* or *Dreams* make game-making way more achievable for non-professionals, but everything you create is owned by Nintendo or Sony." If those services shut down, players' work could be lost forever.

Many Twine stories *could* disappear at some point, lost to changing browser standards or lapsed web domains. But whether their work is ephemeral or stays online for decades, Twine lets people make art on their own terms — even if, eventually, everything is wiped away.

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https://www.theverge.com/22321816/twine-games-history-legacy-art