



## JOURNAL OF INTERACTIVE NARRATIVE

# Emergent Gameplay, Emergent Essaying

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### Abstract

Within our current post-internet landscape of Web 2.0, in which we exist as intermedial beings, I propose Emergent Essaying as a connective term, merging the milieu of game design with hybrid creative writing approaches. Emergent Gameplay is 'a game design term that refers to video game mechanics that change according to the player's actions'. Emergent Essaying utilises gameplay techniques to invite more open, playful, and changeable modes of thinking, encouraging multiplicity and fluidity over fixed thought. Expanding upon creative theorists Lisa Robertson and Anne Carson's approach to the verb 'essaying' as an act of trying, in this digital context I conceive of Emergent Essaying as an act of playful reimagining from both writer/designer and reader/player, in which the essay is more narrative based. I combine game design techniques with the approaches to digital work adopted by indie writers to inform my own practice as a cross-form, cross-genre writer, as reflected both in this paper, and via a link to a digital-born, creative iteration of this work, enacting Emergent Essaying. In this updated version of the paper from 2021, I address the benefits of understanding Emergent Essaying through the lens of performance, and interrogate how this feeds into pedagogical approaches for creative practitioners.

**Keywords:** Emergent Gameplay, Emergent Essaying, Glitching, Hybridity, Performance, Pedagogy

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## 1. In Motion

In our post-internet landscape of Web 2.0, we have become used to the continual motion of language and thought performed by us and before us on screen, enacted in the constant updating of pages and the ability to repeatedly edit posts on social media with the expectation of instant feedback. We are now intermedial beings, consumers and readers, with the virtual and the actual no longer easily distinguishable. As Legacy Russell argues in *Glitch Feminism*, it is now more accurate to state you are AFK (away-from-keyboard), rather than existing IRL (in-real-life) (2020, p. 5). Paralleling this blurring of the environment, the framework of game design is beginning to spill over into creative and experimental writing fields. The combination of Emergent Gameplay and experimental essaying is a hybrid merging, particularly apt and arguably vital to the rapidly shifting rhythms of our everyday digital lives in the contemporary moment.

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Emergence invokes the shifting motion of an ongoing creative process; there is a tension and multiplicity in the word emergence, between quick action and slow unravelling, of what is sudden and urgent (an ‘emergency’<sup>2</sup>) and what is unfurling. Whilst this undercurrent is felt in the process of writing page-based forms, we are assured that the writing is complete through our interaction with a finite physical manuscript. A digital-born work, on the other hand, carries emergence, at the forefront of both its thinking and creation as well as its interaction with the reader, performatively enacting this sense of ongoingness. Instead, we must embrace the difficulties and pacing of the continual evolution emanating from the screen, whether we feel able to explore a digital environment freely or are entrapped in a narrative.

Emergent Gameplay is a recognised aspect of game design where interactivity and narrative come together: generally understood as ‘a game design term that refers to video game mechanics that change according to the player’s actions [...] Emergent gameplay can also be created by adding multiple players to the same game environment and having their individual actions impact the overall game narrative...’ (Techopedia). Horowitz and Loony add to this definition that ‘the term refers to complex outcomes that can result from the interaction of simple rules [...] There are two types of emergence commonly referred to by scholars, intentional and unintentional’ (2014, p. 11). The combination of simple actions and complex outcomes, intentionality and unintentionality, emphasises the nuance and openness of Emergent Gameplay’s narrative potential for communicating complex affective responses and plot tension, as well as blurring the boundaries between creator and player.

In writing an interactive work or game, the writer(s) must be hyperaware of the effects of this Emergent Gameplay, both on the overarching structure and with regard to the key micro moments. The writer must shift between experiencing the game as player and creator, in order to understand how decision-making will impact the experience of playing the game, thinking beyond a single frame of text or play. Emergent Gameplay is rich with possibilities. The uncertainty this multiplicity and reactivity embeds becomes intricately connected to the notion of the ‘glitch’ and the verb ‘glitching’ (considered further below). Its complexity and potential is also related to notions of essaying, hybridity, and experimentation on the page, and adds a specific kind of interactive quality and effect, which shall be seen within the hybrid framework of Emergent Essaying.

## 2. From Wandering to Glitching

In her hybrid essay *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit writes: ‘[...] to be lost is to be fully present and to be fully present is to be capable of being in uncertainty and mystery. And one does not get lost but loses oneself, with the implication that it is a conscious choice, a chosen surrender [...]’ (2006, p. 13).

Solnit's statement connects to the idea of wandering, in both the thinking required for the creative process and in the interaction that can be experienced in a digital-born work. The physical act of wandering brings unintentional discovery, ideas emerge into sharp focus from the chaos of disordered thoughts. Wandering implies a slowing down, which can be uncomfortable in the Big Tech<sup>3</sup> post-internet capitalist environment, which heavily promotes optimisation. There is a desire to provide a better, faster, cleaner mode of engagement, which can, ironically, hold us in a singular space for longer. Wandering is about expanding a field, encouraging a slowed down opening up of complexity; it is anti-optimisation. Connections can be drawn between this type of exploration as an emergent act of essaying in the landscape of Web 2.0, and Guy Debord's original notion of the *dérive*, a mode of experimental psychogeography that encompasses rapid, unplanned exploration of urban landscapes, directed by curiosity (1956). By examining the various facets and rhythms of the city in this way, Debord cultivates a sense of defamiliarisation with these well-worn surroundings. Conversely, Emergent Essaying uses the act of wandering to encourage defamiliarisation in the reader/player, not by way of rushed transitions, but through a slower, more intentional movement, rejecting the pace set by the constant scroll and impulsive click-throughs of our everyday online. The act of getting lost connects to wider thinking about failure and error; if we choose to go down a lesser known path, not linear or with a concrete goal, in many ways we are allowing ourselves to become more vulnerable to error; it is within this space of potential that I see a movement from 'wandering' to the role of the 'glitch' and the act of 'glitching' within Emergent Essaying.

'Glitch' is a mode of error, yet it holds more exuberance and potential than the word 'failure'. In practice, 'glitch' becomes intrinsically linked to openings, portals into the unexpected, inviting an affective response of hope and possibility, alongside chaos, confusion, and anxiety. Glitch is an emergent term in its shifting definitions: it appears both specific to a technological landscape yet holds within this specificity a number of hybrid movements. We might consider glitch in its dictionary definition: 'a minor malfunction [in a computer system] [...] may have derived from the Yiddish *glitsh*, meaning "slippery place"' (Merriam-Webster), but we might also look at it through a wider lens, as its associations expand into further contexts: Glitch Music, Glitch Art, the act of glitching in video game communities, and increasingly its use as a theoretical framework (a recent example being Legacy Russell's *Glitch Feminism*). Glitch artist Rosa Menkman has revealed new possibilities of the mode as an aesthetic practice, and this framework is what is commonly at the forefront of academic, theoretical, and practice-based discussions. In *The Glitch Moment(um)*, Menkman writes 'Glitch, an unexpected occurrence, unintended result, or break or disruption in a system, cannot be singularly codified, which is precisely its conceptual strength and dynamic contribution to media theory.' (2011, p. 26). Menkman posits the glitch in her theoretical unpickings alongside her Glitch Art, with its deliberate subversion of resolution, as a dynamic site of potential. Writer/coder r myers has crafted her own approach to the glitch as aesthetic radical renewal through the.

creation of 'glitcherature' (2014), the title of a Python script she created to apply glitch aesthetics to the texture of text, immediately glitching any writing the user inserts. Through these overt acts, we become aware that a glitch has to begin in a site of familiarity, that it can be both intentional and unintentional (and yet still be surprising and open in both versions), and that it is this departure from the familiar that can act as a catalyst for joy, potential, and unease, to engender a myriad of complex affects that revel in surprise. I look towards Kathleen Stewart's theoretical work *Ordinary Affects* to conceptualise these responses: 'Ordinary affects are the varied, surging capacities to affect and be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergence.' (2007, p. 2)

How then does this subversion and consequent generation of affective responses relate to Emergent Essaying, connecting back to ideas of wandering and losing one's way? Glitch must first be understood as it stands within these many fields and contexts, as an active digital-born mode that creates entries into new beginnings or alternative continuations. The verb 'glitching' here also brings another mode into play: 'glitching' in the field of Game Design is understood, as Meades and Consalvo theorise, as a collective act of players unlocking faults within a game to carve their own playing experience. Meades (2013) promotes the ideas of thinking through glitching as more complex than a negative interference whilst Consalvo (2009) connects glitching more overtly to acts of cheating, promoting the idea that it is not a wholly negative intervention, but rather an important collaboration between player, game, and writer, offered up by the specific emergent techniques enabled by the technologies of the form. Glitching functions as an interventional act of emergence, handing over control of the narrative structure to the reader and the potentialities of the text itself. Page-based text can be open to varied interpretations and viewpoints, but in the digital environment this occurs performatively, with the text and game never wholly stable. The under wiring of the code is revealed, reflecting the fragility of binary (closed) thought as further collaborative choices are opened within the context of the work.

Additional tensions also exist within the effects and purposes of glitching. After a recent talk, I was asked whether the act of speedrunning in a video game can be considered a radical emergent glitching within the framework I am proposing. Speed-running as framed by Scully-Blaker is indeed an Emergent Gameplay practice: 'the process of completing a game as quickly as possible without the use of cheats or cheat devices' (2014). Whilst this act of racing through a game is a radical intervention by the player, it does not fall into the expansive wandering that I am positing with Emergent Essaying. If speed-running exists as 'post(human) performance art' as posited by Hay (2020), in which speculation, competitiveness, and instant gratification are at the forefront, then slow meandering through choice, and a re-framing of 'glitching' with 'essaying' as a means to travel in different directions, inserts the human mind with all its errors and capabilities of discovery back into the digital sphere.

The mode of glitching I envision within Emergent Essaying is one which subverts the optimisation

rhythms of quick movement and success, so often geared towards solutionism rather than the chaotic and difficult slower progression of our thoughts, which are capable of curiosity, change, and alternative directions. This expansive definition and practice of Emergent Essaying builds upon the definition of experimental essaying posited by Phillip Lopate, ‘The essay is a notoriously flexible and adaptable form. It possesses the freedom to move anywhere, in all directions.’ [1995, p. xxxvii]. This takes on new relevance in Emergent Essaying, where digital writing tools such as Twine turn readers into players, literally wandering between ideas. By embracing performative glitches along with the potential for genuine errors, we can enact a playful spatiality to wander and become lost in language. This thinking is in line with Lisa Robertson’s words from ‘Time in the Codex’: ‘It is the most commodious sensation I can imagine, this being lost.’ (2012, p. 13). Commodious implies a comfortable space in which to roam freely and explore. What roominess might gameplay offer us?

With that question in mind, there has been an increasing number of commercial games that have reveled in a slower, more observant explorational narrative movement. One example is the action-adventure game *Subnautica* (2014), an open world survival game that encourages the slow exploration of the ocean of an alien planet.

Alternative ‘commodious’ modes of play can interact with the ‘commodious’ sensation of thinking in relation to reading, writing, and time, which is the experience and feeling Robertson is describing. A rejection of the flattened idea of quick success and point scoring as the primary mode of glitching makes room for more of the wonder that can be found in the space of non-linear thinking and variables, discussed further below. Here, I connect this idea of resistance to cognitive control and clear meaning-making back to the field of Affect Studies, particularly Spinoza’s emphasis on the ‘not-yet’ knowing of affective doing that drives affect, which resists any ultimate resolution, with the capability to hold complex responses and relations in tandem (1959). Emergent Essaying plays out this multiplicity on the screen through clickable links and changeable dynamics; like Affect Studies, it functions as a practice that resists singular reductive definitions. Here, in the liminal of the hybrid, is the possibility for a more exuberant ‘slippery space’.

### 3. To Try, To Play

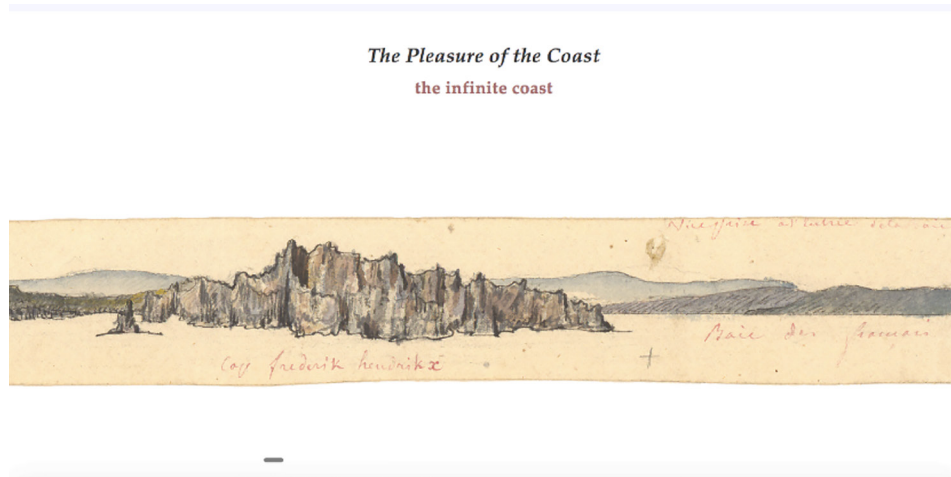
Think of essay as a verb, as a becoming. To essay is to try within an experimental, creative context. I parallel this with Anne Carson’s statement: ‘Consider incompleteness as a verb’ (2000, p. 29), from the hybrid collection *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry*. Emergent Essaying seeks to expand this notion of ongoingness into the sphere of digital-born play. What does it mean to play into an idea, to write into the glitch?

Hybridising essaying with gameplay feels ever more important in our increasingly digitalised world,

where concepts of digital play can easily slide into a framework of optimisation. Instead, we can reconceptualise play in line with emergence as a more nuanced unravelling of thought and creation: a nexus of multiple ideas and genres. Play invokes desire. Experimental essayist Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes: ‘The essay is restless [...] always a little too thirsty.’ (2000, p. 38); the merging of gameplay and playfulness in language can enhance this sensation of continuous reaching, with the addition of obstacles supplanting neat, conclusive arguments.

Emergent Essaying intertwines the acts of trying and playing. Here, the thinking is innately interdisciplinary, combining elements of interactive fiction, gameplay techniques, and hybrid essaying. Academic digital theory (most centrally in the field of Electronic Literature) has traditionally focused on hypertext—the joining of fragmented pieces of text, through links, a form which Robert Coover argues ‘offers the patient reader [...] just such an experience of losing oneself to a text’ (1995). However, digital writers and researchers, such as Nick Montfort have been increasingly promoting the in-depth study and value of interactive fiction (2005). Emergent Essaying exists at the intersection of literary hypertext, the gameplay and narrative of interactive fiction, and the multi-potential layering of these seemingly disparate forms and techniques. More broadly, it is in conversation with other Electronic Literature forms, defined by the Electronic Literature Organization as ‘works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer.’ which, is followed by a list, which includes hypertext, computer art installations, and kinetic poetry (interestingly, this list does not make any reference to the term ‘essay’) (2004). However, it does not need to be understood singularly as a literary or hypertextual form, and, in line with Nick Montfort’s thinking on interactive fiction, Emergent Essaying can fully embrace the specific effects afforded by gameplay design as a means to create new structures of creative-critical thought, through shifting relations between player and writer.

A writer whose work embraces the possibilities of essaying in its hybrid approach is J.R. Carpenter, whose electronic writing/art often concerns the collision of historical documents with the contemporary digital framework. In *The Pleasure of the Coast* (2019), the user accesses the work through a non-linear format, scrolling horizontally rather than vertically, to enact an exploration of landscape. The work recalls the aesthetics of chapbooks, albeit with the sense of space afforded by the digital realm. Pencil line drawings are joined with kinetic text, playfully layering historical found text and fictional narration.



**Fig. 1. Screenshot from J.R. Carpenter's *The Pleasure of the Coast* (2019), on the section 'the infinite coast', featuring a continual horizontal scroll.**

Carpenter uses the layering of aesthetics and user experience, forming a palimpsest of image and text alongside the scrolling mechanic, to create an alternative mapping effect that is imperfect and in motion, encouraging the user/reader to slow down and examine how they engage with the work. The simplicity of the section 'the infinite coast', and the performative glitch effect of forever scrolling sideways, asserts a lack of closure.

Carpenter also encourages a mode of error-making in writing, stating that 'imperfections are deliberate', including errors of translation. Here, the digital techniques and artistic practice inform one another, leading to new slants in seeing and comprehending, in the real-time pace of the on-screen reading experience.

When examining Carpenter's approach to essaying, apt connections can be found in the Web 1.0 hypertext works of Shelley Jackson, whose landmark text *Patchwork Girl* (1995) brings together Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), with contemporary understandings of the post-human as posited in Donna Haraway's 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs' (1985), resulting in a sprawling, monstrous conception of the female body through the rhizomatic form of the hypertext reading structure. The movement of following a hyperlink to another page of text induces an awareness of multi-layering: what is not accessed immediately is still knowingly an integral part of the narrative.

Modes of critique and essaying which borrow from hypertextual rhythms are cropping up in page-based creative-critical writing such as 'hypercriticism', defined by Manifold Press (n.d.) as the merging of ideas



through associative word and phrase linkage. Emergent Essaying adds layers of performance and interactivity, with the reader/player existing as a vital part of the writing, performing this more 'blissful' mode of reading, that is 'writerly', as posited by Barthes (1975). Emergent Essaying engages with gameplay techniques, such as non-linearity, variables (collecting objects or scores that affect later parts of the narrative), external data, randomisation (diverging points emerging through chance for different players), and intentional glitches alongside the potential for genuine malfunctions, to influence how readers/players understand and engage with the thinking and poetic effects of the work. The tension created by Ludonarrative Dissonance (described by Hocking as 'a powerful dissonance between what it is about as a game, and what it is about as a story', in relation to the game Bioshock (2007)) must be kept in mind during the writing and playing of Emergent Essaying. Techniques should not simply be implemented because they are available in the digital realm but because they create new experiences of understanding through play that are linked to the themes and connections the writer is exploring. This ethos must be embraced when working with game writing tools such as Twine, in which the author must also inhabit the role of player, creating an environment in which gameplay influences essaying and vice versa.

Game designer Elizabeth Sampat subverts the idea that games are simply a mode of eliciting empathy like many page-based forms, instead arguing that they can function as empathetic models, if empathy is directly built into their structure by the designer (2017). Here, not only content but also structural systematic understanding can be subverted, demonstrated in *Am I Part of The Problem?* (2017), in which the player must address their own biases and approaches, offering direct critical insight, tailored to the individual, as they answer questions in order to understand their role in a conflict situation. In the introduction to the game, Sampat recognises that it holds no definitive solutions. Instead, through play, it offers a look into the self that does not feel prescriptive or reductive in its assumptions about the player.

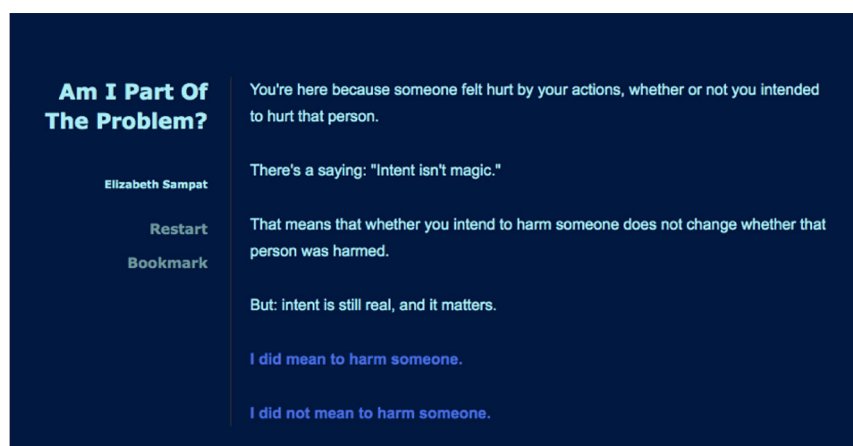


Fig. 2. Screenshot from Elizabeth Sampat's *Am I Part of The Problem?* (2017), showing the opening choices of the gameplay.



In drawing upon elements of New Media works that gesture towards the essay approach, from the game design of Sampat to Carpenter's hypermedia, Emergent Essaying opens up another layer of cross-form conversation, reconfiguring and expanding the expectations of the essay in a multimedia landscape, between game design and Electronic Literature, inviting the term 'essay' to co-mingle performatively with 'play'.

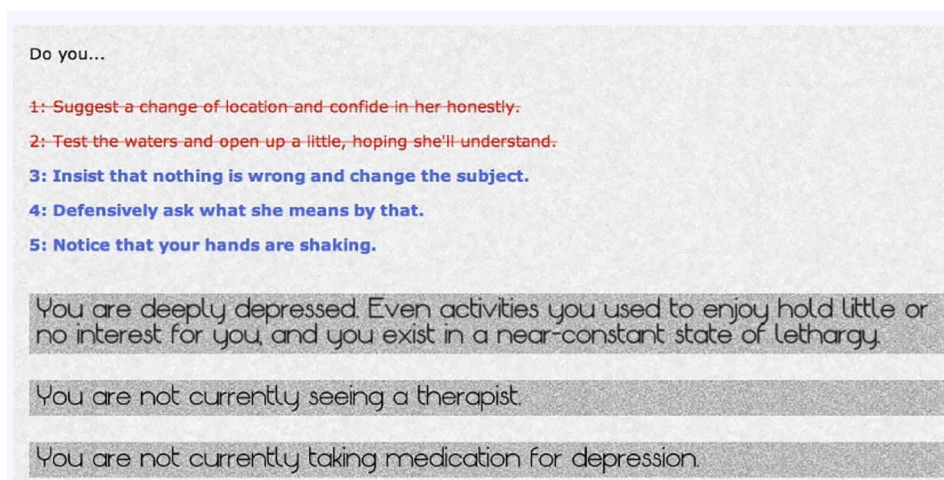
Within this context, play must be understood in its many facets, beyond gameplay; Huizinga (1917) regards the function of play as just as important as work in society, a "free" mode; the motivation of play being the experience it offers rather than the concrete goal. We can connect this to Halberstam's (2011) conceptualisation of low theory, as a mode of play and child-like pleasure in process, crafted through error. The digital gameplay of Emergent Essaying promotes a more playful approach to understanding, with language play intertwining with digital interactive gameplay, each informing and driving the other to capture new ways of seeing, doing, asking, and inviting. This layering of play encourages us to think more receptively, questioning our knowledge and opening us up to new experiences and information. Through play, we move beyond the individual to a collective and collaborative space of thought. Thinking merges with play, emerges from within it, sometimes consciously, often unconsciously.

#### 4. Emergent Essaying: Time and Practice

Time and pacing are integral to both writing and experiencing Emergent Essaying. Key questions must be considered during the planning and writing, such as: how long will the player remain in the text, and will its duration impact the player's emotional connection to the work? Will the player feel trapped, will this give a feeling of stasis, will slow thinking or fast thinking be created through links and choices? Pacing takes on an important role in this process, as the writer and text impact the experiences of the player/reader, not only through length at a syntactic level, but also on a wider scale via choice, repetition, and looping. The distinct conceptualisation of temporality in game-time has been expanded by Jayemanne (2019, 2020), who has crafted a methodology called 'chronotypology' as an approach to 'facilitate literary approaches to video game temporality' using terms such as "synchrony" to demonstrate the layers of temporality built up through the gameplay, as distinct from other literary modes.

In considering the importance of time in the game environment, I am drawn to Zoe Quinn's *Depression Quest* (2013), which labels itself as an interactive (non)-fiction about the everyday realities of living with depression, and which to my mind, is an act of essaying, in that it uses narrative and gameplay to both emotionally and critically immerse the player/reader fully in the complex ideas it is communicating. The game has hundreds of different options and would take the average player around half an hour to navigate. Throughout the piece, choices become limited by the player's previous decisions, resulting in different narrative outcomes. The text is accompanied by ambient music, altering in response to player

choices, with sound, play, and narrative tone informing one other. Alternative choices can often be seen but are scored out, letting you know that, based on the current state of you/the character's emotions, certain options are no longer available (reflecting the lack of bodily and mental control experienced during deep bouts of depression). Here it is clear that timing has been carefully considered; although there are large chunks of text to be read in each fragment, the intimacy and momentum created by the narrative response to player choices encourages users to complete the game in a single sitting. The use of second person here enhances the sense of immediacy; that we are a vital part of the text's inner workings, capable of creating pathways that may diverge from others' experiences of the work. Moreover, the use of gameplay (in which players are presented with limited options and varying sound effects) offers a degree of reflection and space to understand what changes are taking place as a result of the character's depression: critical thinking and emotional investment in the narrative are carefully and intentionally crafted.



**Fig. 3. Screenshot (taken from Steam) from Depression Quest (2013) by Zoe Quinn, Patrick Lindsey, Isaac Shankler, demonstrating choices becoming increasingly limited in gameplay.**

If our sense of time is thwarted by the short attention spans and immediate responses of Web 2.0, Emergent Essaying has the capability to expand how we experience and consider time in this virtual world. Writers of these experimental digital forms can continually re-frame their own considerations of narrative time, through the reflective, slow thinking required to create complex linkages and gameplay techniques. Returning to this idea of wandering, digital-born works have the capability to deliberately slow down a player/reader's mind through emergent techniques, as well as providing them with a sense of freedom to individually navigate the text.

The 'glitch' is an integral aspect of time in the practice of writing and experiencing Emergent Essaying, as it exists as a moment of stasis and potential. I often think of the glitch in relation to Derrida's notion of

'hauntology' (1994), a reminder of the work's past state and flux, its ghostly underpinnings, the mark the writer has left on the machine and that the reader has yet to leave. There is also the sense of temporality and fragility, in the awareness that the essay can 'break' or be meddled with by the reader, which opens a more ambivalent mode of thinking.

The term Emergent Essaying creates immediate connections between what are often thought of as disparate fields, bringing together elements of game design, hypertextual forms, and experimental essaying (which can include lyrical, narrative, and theoretical/philosophical tracts). It challenges the ideas around what a game entails and an essay involves, centering itself more around narrative exploration of ideas than the concrete pursuit of goals of the former or the neat conclusive arguments of the latter. If essaying is a mode of trying, Emergent Essaying inserts a more playful understanding and enacting of questioning and intervention, through a continually shifting dynamic between player, writer, and gamer.

## 5. Emergent Essaying as Performance

Since first publishing and presenting my ideas on Emergent Essaying (Dunlop, 2021), I have further explored the ways in which this theoretical framework and creative practice can function distinctively and be in conversation with page-based forms, by engaging with the advantages and possibilities of conceptualising the practice's qualities and effects through the lens of performance. I am situating this connection within the context of ongoing research that looks at the intersections between performance and gameplay (discussed further below), rooted in an expanded notion of what essaying can do and be.

The movement towards thinking through the context of performance has arisen from conversations with creators and thinkers across disciplines. Speaking to other writers (of both fiction and non-fiction), I have identified numerous connections between the process of designing a digital-born Emergent Essay and the structuring, writing, and editing of a page based work. After all, few creative processes follow a linear path, even if the finished work has a clear beginning, middle, and end. The questions that arose from digital practitioners were more focused around the practical benefits of the form and the features that distinguished it from a page-based text. Where lies the value in presenting essaying as a digital, playful form? What can the digital environment offer and what does it teach? These discussions have led me to consider how a framework of understanding Emergent Essaying in tandem with performance, in its intentionality (which links together ideas expressed earlier in this article such as temporality, playfulness, and text-in-motion), can help craft an understanding of the merits of combining essaying with gameplay that is simultaneously expansive and precise. Moreover, I want to consider how the performativity of essaying as an ongoing thought process, merged with gameplay, can produce new insights into writing for the page.

For expansion on this idea, I look towards J.R. Carpenter whose work also dives into the connections

and overlaps between performance and digital writing. *An Ocean of Static* (2018) is a page-based collection that opens up the under wiring of variable thinking and processes, revealing code as performative agent, through fragments including sections of code syntax which can also be understood, as performance scripts:

‘An owl and a girl most [‘adventurous’, ‘curious’, ‘studious’] [‘set out’, ‘set sail’, ‘sailed away’] in a [‘bottle-green’, ‘beetle-green’, ‘pea-green’] [‘boat’, ‘sieve’, ‘skiff’ vessel] (2018, p. 23)

‘It is no coincidence,’ Carpenter writes, ‘that the word “scripts” appears in the name “JavaScript” – Javascript is a procedural language. Like a script for live performance, Javascript must be written and read in a particular order in order to be performed by the web browser’ (2021). By considering machine as actor, with code as script, we can better conceptualise how Emergent Essaying functions as an ongoing live event, even when there is only one player interacting with the piece. Here, the materiality of the digital is brought to the forefront: Emergent Essaying is very much concerned with this materiality, interaction, and experience: after all, the glitch itself is a material event. We can connect the act of ‘glitching’ to improvisation or collaboration in live human performance, where a glitch may echo an unexpected occurrence on stage or even a deliberate disruption by a performer. I will expand upon these ideas further below.

It is important to note that the wider connections between performance and gameplay specifically are by no means new: in *Performativity in Art, Literature and Videogames*, Jayemanne writes that ‘A videogame can be seen as an archive that is accessed, modified and manipulated in a very particular way: playful performance’ (2017, p. 2). More recently, the increasing use of streaming platforms, such as Twitch.tv, has been analysed by scholars, to showcase another degree of spectatorship and performance, whereby more games are being designed to not only be played but also watched by large groups online.<sup>4</sup> My approach specifically interrogates how essaying (often seen as an interior and individual act of thinking, writing, and reading) is bent and expanded through this performative act of gameplay, in which affective response and engagement is just as important as any technical innovations with structure. The hybridisation of gameplay with creative critical thinking carves open our interrogation of how essaying can function in a variety of different contexts by holding us in a site of exploration and uncertainty.

This performance of Emergent Essaying opens up the creative and critical thinking process on several temporal levels through performance: on one level, the writing and creative process is being performed on the screen (writing as an ongoing process, filled with the potential for variables which we do not see in the finished draft of a book): when this takes place, through emergence on the screen, we are offered an opportunity to play with choice and to become, to a certain extent, a collaborator in the work’s creation. On another level, Emergent Essaying can be understood as a performance of alternative means of thinking through what essays can do and be, set apart from the conventional, linear structure of academic essays in

the Arts, which tend to favour a fairly rigid mode of argumentation and evaluation over narrative structures, often proscriptively avoiding the lyrical 'I'. While we can write a non-linear and experimental essay on the page, clickable links, multiple pathways, randomisation, outside variables, the fragility of the work itself, and other emergent qualities create a play-through version of what experimental essaying can be: constantly in flux, interrogating itself as it is played. While a book always already contains the words we will read, the same cannot be said of a digital text, which is only being activated by the combined presence of the words, the machine, the player, and the creator. The expansiveness of Emergent Essaying can be understood as a performance and literalisation of Anne Carson's statement that: 'I don't know that we really think any thoughts: we think connections between thoughts' (2006). Within this approach, I think there is vast potential to think through what playing and writing into this form can do for re-crafting and defamiliarising our own sense of how we critically and creatively think, play, and write. By actively signposting links and portals (for example, through hyperlinks and player choice), readers can be made more cognizant of new strands of thought as they emerge. I also draw upon Karan Barad's theory of "Agential Realism", a challenge against individualist metaphysics, which highlights that agency is a relationship, with objects emerging through specific intra-actions (2007). Here, performance can act as an ongoing theorisation practice and agency for the thinking and creative process of expansive essaying.

It feels important here to return to the glitch more explicitly in this framework. The Performance Art practitioner Matthew Goulsh advocates for the positive aspects of failure in performance, and the use of failure as a generative approach to the work itself (2000). Echoing what I have said earlier in this article, despite more expansive explorations of the positive iterations of failure in art and literature,<sup>5</sup> the word cannot be fully removed from its negative connotations. The glitch is Emergent Essaying's generative version of the proximity of failure during a live event, and in this sense, the performance distinguishes itself from a page-based form. After all, while readers can have differing perspectives and define a work as a 'failure' if they so wish, when faced with a book, the work cannot physically break or bring up words or notions not planned by its creators live on the page. The glitch reveals the fragile materiality of the virtual, rejecting the notion of a clean space so often foregrounded in the capitalist online world of today. Simultaneously, while Emergent Essaying's glitchfulness is distinct from the page, it teaches us through the performance of collaboration the extent to which all literature can be understood as a collaborative act with emerging re-interpretations and effects (albeit with degrees of variation across forms, genres, and media), giving form to the writer and essayist Lydia Davis' statement that: 'Of course, any book and any piece of writing is also a cooperative. It is, in itself as printed on the page, incomplete. It requires a reader to complete it.' (2019, p. 204).

One explicit example of how Emergent Essaying can function as a theoretical enactment of both the creative process and the shifting of roles between reader and writer, is in the performative way in which it withholds and reveals information, which also ties into looping and entrapment in gameplay. By employing

techniques such as revealing text only after a certain amount of time (as demonstrated in the digital iteration of this article) or forcing players to return to a specific point in the text, it interrogates how time and pacing can play out on the page. Of course, page-based forms cannot anticipate how a reader will experience the work to this degree; readers can cut back and forth between chapters, skip key sections, re-read if they wish, but this is outside the control of the work itself. By controlling and at other times giving players a notion of freedom in exploring a text, Emergent Essaying can actively slow down reading practices, holding us in a moment of defamiliarisation from how we experience both the digital and the book form; it can also allow us to see how we respond affectively to re-reading and re-interpretation.

Another example of the advantages of this performance framework can be found in the very act of writing and designing an Emergent Essay, particularly through a platform like Twine, where we can literally see before us a map and bird's eye view of the structure of the work during its creation. Writing into this form requires (as mentioned earlier) a very different process and mode of thinking to writing on the page. Non-linearity is immediately established at the outset, and the careful thinking of how techniques and content will be combined and play into each other is assessed and re-assessed continually. Simultaneously, writing into this format can teach us innovative methods of re-structuring and re-conceptualising our relationship to writing for the page. During my own process of moving from being a page-based writer to a digital writer, the performance nature of writing and narrative design in this form (with the context of understanding this as an act of essaying) has made me more aware of the thought patterns I fall into (for example, ideas and tangents which may occur only semi-consciously or implicitly on the page are given form and space by the hyperlinks and variables which can be incorporated into an Emergent Essay). In this vein, writing and playing Emergent Essaying can function as an ongoing and generative pedagogical approach.

## 6. Emergent Essaying as Pedagogical Practice

Over the past year, I have been putting forth the concept of Emergent Essaying across my teaching practices in both an academic context (at the University of Glasgow and as a visiting lecturer at various institutions) and outside of this in a wider writing community, through my role as Senior Editor at the post-internet publisher, SPAM Press. Through teaching, discussion, and the creative responses of students, I have begun to view more concretely the benefits and the vast potential offered by Emergent Essaying as a practice and a pedagogical tool.

There is a wide expanse of ongoing research into the value of employing interactive narratives in the classroom<sup>6</sup> but my focus specifically illuminates the advantages of framing this through essaying as a writing practice and feedback resource. I also want to focus on why essaying itself is an important aspect to continually expand upon and re-frame in an academic context, particularly in the Arts, where different

forms (and indeed mediums) can be used beneficially for opening critical and theoretical writings and understandings. Indeed, the limited frame of analysis of page-based academic essays is no longer the only relevant lens through which artistic critical researchers and creative-critical thinkers can interrogate and explore the nuances of other critical works and ideas. For inspiration and ideas of alternative modes of essaying, we should also look towards page-based work that breaks open the possibilities of the form, such as Ali Smith's *Artful* (2012), which combines theories of time, movement, and place with a narrative character who relates these experiences to emotional everyday life moments, with a focus on grief. We can also consider the short-short fragments of Lydia Davis (2014), which lie somewhere between flash fiction and the essay, as well as the lyrical essaying and interplay of image and second-person fragments in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2015). These examples place essaying firmly within a narrative, poetic, and expansive creative writing field, showing how closely linked the subject, character relationships, and internal thought patterns play into critical thought. What happens when we understand essaying as a creative narrative encounter, in which ideas are played out through voice, storytelling, and lyrical precision, in which political theories and histories are assembled in a hybrid creative approach, that is also rhythmically and viscerally connected to human emotion?

One of the first examples I encountered of a student interrogating a page-based text through Emergent Essaying (following a lecture I gave on the possibilities of this hybrid form) was through the conversion of *Citizen* (mentioned above) into a Twine piece, utilising looping, GIFs, and questions to illuminate a key moment from the original text in which image and writing interplay. This approach made me consider to a greater extent how Emergent Essaying can function as a close-reading, or perhaps more accurately, a close-playing tool, raising the question: what happens when we recontextualise specific aspects of a page-based work into a digital landscape with gameplay combined? How does this re-situate our relationship to the original text, in which the techniques of the medium open up nuances surrounding tension, pacing, and emotion as much as the language itself? How does this act function as an expanded performance of the text on the page? There is still much to explore in this particular approach.

By applying the tool Twine to a pedagogical context, especially in creative writing courses, more students are able to try their hand at New Media writing. Not only does this open up new ways to experience and conceive work, but it also provides an accessible entry point into coding and digital writing in the Arts, beyond the fields of Game Studies, visual practices, and Computer Science coding courses. While my definition of Emergent Essaying encourages the inclusion of gameplay elements (i.e. emergent gameplay techniques such as randomisation, use of variables, choices, outside data), Emergent Essaying can be expanded upon, when used as a generative teaching practice. Some examples of the directions students have taken this in are:

- a performance/installation text with writing flickering up, alongside GIFs, interrogating the practice of handwashing during COVID-19 and its connections to mental health. By focusing on the bodily



repetitions and incorporating live writing alongside nostalgic black and white moving images, they successfully emphasised the repetition and emotional nuances of this everyday act.

- a poetry-essay pamphlet written entirely into Twine, utilising hybrid critical practices through hyperlinks between artworks and poems, while expanding on the attunement of specific words and syntax play through the use of variables.
- an interactive essay, using emergent techniques, including the use of macros through inventories to lead the reader/player down different lines of thought, connecting seemingly disparate fields such as medicine with mythology and astronomy with knitting, all framed within a video game-like quest structure.

There is a clear desire from creative writing students at different stages of their practice to interrogate how the digital can expand their critical-creative process, with New Media attuning these writers to the ways in which content and structure are integral to one another. By introducing students to digital writing tools such as Twine, they are able to apply a greater degree of intentionality to their writing, encouraging them to think more about the user experience. Interactive narrative moves beyond the framework of game design, which for some students can be intimidating or can appear to be beyond their capabilities or interests, into the expanding field of hybrid creative-critical writing studies. Moreover, for those who are interested in the field of Game Studies, it can help to reframe their approach to gameplay techniques through the lens of hybrid experimental practices. At its core, Emergent Essaying invites conversation, an appreciation for the subtlety of language, narrative patterns and unexpected direction and is a performance of ongoing interdisciplinary practices and conversations.

## 7. Conclusion

As I continue to practice, write, teach, play, and think through the concepts and possibilities of Emergent Essaying, my ideas around what it may include are themselves continually emerging. I deliberately resist providing an explicit and singular definition of what this form can be and do in this article, but rather intend that the contours and directions of this practice are revealed through the methodology of this text (and even more expansively through the link below to Emergent Essaying in practice). However, a key defining aspect of this emerging form is its combination of Emergent Gameplay techniques with an approach to essaying that blends affective response with critical thinking. In doing so, it can be understood as a creative-critical conceptualisation of what essaying can be, resistant to the linear movement of formal academic conventions. I believe the fields of Game Studies, hybrid creative writing, experimental essaying, and Electronic Literature uplift and inform one other and offer genuine in-practice connections between emerging fields of thought across disciplines, from science to the arts, to performance, art writing, and theory.

Although I have framed it within specific material and technological concepts, my hope is that Emergent Essaying can continue to be expanded upon, and I can already see this taking place, through teaching, conversation, and feedback. For me, this continually resituates my position as a writer (or am I a designer?) and as a reader (or am I player?). The reactions to my own Emergent Essaying have expanded my notion of its possibilities just as much: players continue to find glitches and new openings that I couldn't even have imagined and so the work gains new life and new possibilities.

**In order to demonstrate the practice of Emergent Essaying, and give the reader an experience of one iteration it might take, the digital-born, alternative and experimental version of this paper, written in Twine, can be accessed below**

# Emergent Gameplay, Emergent Essaying

**Begin in Play**

**Begin in  
Essaying**

## Endnotes

[1] ‘The postinternet is kind of to say, we don’t even log on anymore; this is just being. [...] The postinternet is kind of to say, what would still constitute an online experience of the sublime? Is there a resistant potential in pursuing this, or staying with the sheer sense of the internet’s dailiness?’ SPAM zine & Press, (n.d.).

[2] ‘And the state of emergency is also always a state of emergence.’ (Bhabha, 1994, p. 59).

[3] “Big Tech” refers to the hegemony major technology companies have over society. For more on the links between this control and the attention economy in our era, see Grafton Tanner’s *The Circle of the Snake: Nostalgia and Utopia in the Age of Big Tech*. (2020).

[4] See Scully-Blaker, Begy, Consalvo and Ganzon’s ‘Playing along and Playing for on Twitch: Livestreaming from Tandem Play to Performance’ (2017).

[5] See Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011).

[6] See Shahid and Khan’s ‘Use of Digital Storytelling in Classrooms and Beyond’ (2022) for a recent example.

## Note

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