

Laura Zaylea
Flow Conference
Project Title: Closer Than Rust: Reflections on the Process
of Creating A Queer-Themed Interactive Digital Novel
Panel: Queer Media Studies' Futures
Date: October 1, 2012

My abstract focuses on *Closer Than Rust*, a feature screenplay I wrote in 2011 that I am now developing as an interactive digital novel. The process of creating a queer-themed work in a hybrid media environment leads me to questions of Queer Media Studies' Futures.

--

Closer Than Rust was written as a feature screenplay about three queer characters (an Asian American lesbian, a bisexual African American woman and a Caucasian genderqueer boi) each trying to manifest their dreams in a small, rural Southern town. Queer identity is central to this screenplay, and yet the project isn't overtly *about* queer identity – although all of the primary protagonists are queer.

The core plotline of *Closer Than Rust* follows two stories: That of an Asian American lesbian (VESPA) who moves to town hoping to start an artist-focused internet café that will bring technology resources to *everyone*, not only the rich, and simultaneously the story of a Caucasian genderqueer trash collector (JAMIE) who falls in love with a beautiful African American woman on the trash route (ALIZA).

Vespa's "queerness" – like that of all characters in the project – is in the particularity of her identity. She is not stereotypically "lesbian" and she is not *more* "lesbian" than any other facet of her identity. She is lesbian *and* Asian American *and* wealthy *and* educated/cultured *and* an artist-entrepreneur.

Jamie's gender ambiguous identity makes Jamie's "queerness" more readable and readily apparent. At the same time, "non-queer" characteristics – like Jamie's unusual ability to dialog with inanimate objects – all become part of the uniqueness and "queerness" of Jamie's character.

These core characters are no more particular or peculiar than side characters who are not overtly LGBT, including Mama Casselberry (who cleans her plastic garden with Windex), Frankie (who eats burgers from the trash and has a porn obsession) or Tanisa (who talks to her sock puppets in public).

The project, then, aims to create an environment in which the protagonists are allowed to be fully "queer" in their identities – without overt homophobia or constraint – and it is this openness of being that allows *all* characters to be unique and quirky individuals.

Closer Than Rust is now being developed as an interactive work which will involve prose writing, images, video, audio and interactive elements. Though the story was originally written as a feature screenplay, transforming it into a digital novel allows multiple layers of meaning – of diegetic story and metanarrative theory – to be woven together in new and interesting ways.

While the hybrid media version of *Closer Than Rust* will present the core themes and plot of the original screenplay, using a variety of media types will allow for a deeper examination of core themes inspiring the work. For example, there is one scene in the film in which protagonist Jamie is building a robot from materials stolen from the trash. Watching these abandoned items come together to form a robot-like sculpture, the hybrid media reader will be able to choose a central discourse to contextualize this narrative moment. They might select: The Transgender Body (intentionally creating one's own gender presentation, symbolized by the fabrication of a robot sculpture); Multicultural Community (another core theme of the work, symbolized by the way diverse elements come together to create one creature); or Recycled Art (an important contemporary theme, though the protagonist is not aware of playing a role in this).

While I feel strongly about this direction of the project, I also do wonder about the following questions that it raises:

1. Will the relative *absence* of dialog about homophobia and heteronormativity – or about queer codes and symbols – be empowering or just the opposite: Will it gloss over important issues and/or not give voice and praise to powerful symbols of LGBTQ community?
2. How does the project format (interactive book for tablet devices) allow for multiple readings, and further interrogation of the story's content (characters, plot), guiding philosophies and metanarrative theories? How can the medium be used to include further information – within or along with the narrative – about multicultural and diverse experiences of queer identity?
3. A tablet-based work allows reader-participants to *hold* the story quite literally in their hands. How might this level of intimacy influence the way the story is told or experienced?
4. How can combining of many media types (images, audio, video text, graphics, interactive elements) create a “queering” of forms and potentially push boundaries of style, layout and story structure? What software will (or will not) allow for this experimentation?
5. As a queer author creating a queer work, what is my responsibility – if any – to queer and/or to non-queer audiences?

Panel Topic:

Copied from <http://flowtv.org>

Queer Media Studies' Futures

“The development of location-based services such as Grindr, the debates spawned by the “It Gets Better” project, and the emergence of queer gaming communities raise questions about the future of queer media studies. What is the point of queer media studies? What are the political stakes of this intellectual project? What are the evaluative, deliberative, and/or descriptive dimensions of a queer media studies that embraces textual representations, labor, participation, platform politics, and networked flows? What challenges do new media and communication technologies pose to queer theorizing about media representation, reception, and production? What challenges do they pose to the traditional methodologies used by cinema and media scholars? How can queer media studies scholars speak and write in a language more accessible to diverse queer communities? How might new media and communication technologies facilitate this process?”