Edmond Y. Chang

Gaming while Asian

1

To E. Tang

1. Forebears

❝I know something about labyrinths," says the narrator of Jorge Luis Borges's famous story "The Garden of Forking Paths." He continues, "I am the great-grandson of Ts'ui Pen. He was Governor of Yunnan and gave up temporal power to write a novel . . . to create a maze in which all men would lose themselves . . . His novel had no sense to it and nobody ever found his labyrinth."[1] First published in 1941 and translated from Spanish into English in 1948, the short story has become an ur-text for early digital culture, electronic literature, and game studies and continues to wend and wind its way through digital technologies that evince branching narratives, unusual temporalities, puzzles, and playfulness, qualities Espen Aarseth labels "ergodic," a text where the reader and player are "constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard. Each decision will make some parts of the text more, and others less, accessible, and what you may never know the exact results of your choices."[2] According to Mou-Lan Wong, "The Garden of Forking Paths" is an "intertextual hub," and it

collects, connects, and "anticipates various interactive pop-culture narratives from printed texts to digital and cinematic media."[3] Borges's exotic mythologizing and playful inscrutability has become foundational to technocultural design, narratives, and worlds such that "The Garden"'s techno-orientalist logics have become deeply entangled, naturalized in the way we imagine, interact with, and play games.[4]

As the story unfurls, the narrator learns from a British sinologist named Stephen Albert of the truth of the narrator's ancestor and the textual, spatial, and temporal mysteries of the "Garden." The narrator describes the labyrinth, saying, "I imagined it infinite, made not only of eight-sided pavilions and of twisting paths but also of rivers, provinces and kingdoms. . . . I thought of a maze of mazes, of a sinuous, ever growing maze which would take in both past and future and would somehow involve the stars."[5] The metaphor of unending twisting and sinuous (and *sino*-ous) paths would be forever imprinted, embedded, and enacted by digital technologies and games with no purer expression than the emblematic phrase, "You are in a maze of twisty little passages," from Will Crowther's 1970s *Colossal Cave Adventure*.

This story, this mystery adventure of an unwitting Asian spy during World War I wanting to prove that "a yellow man could save [Germany's] armies" lays bare the metonymic ways Asianness is narrated and encoded into the experiences, discourses, and analyses of games;[6] the inscrutability of the story vis-à-vis the inscrutability of the labyrinth vis-à-vis the inscrutability of the narrator condenses into what Tara Fickle names "ludo-Orientalism" or the "design, marketing, and rhetoric of games shapes how Asians as well as East-West relations are imagined and where notions of foreignness and racial hierarchies get reinforced."[7] The narrator of "The Garden of Forking Paths" not only plays the games of espionage and fugitive, functioning as a literal pawn of war, he must also play the game of representation, of being multiply othered, of simultaneously being "unreal and unimportant" yet "infinitely visible and vulnerable" as an outsider, a foreigner, a racialized body.[8] It takes a Western perspective to make legible the secrets of the labyrinth and of the narrator; Albert is the one to solve Ts'ui Pen's puzzle: the book and labyrinth are one and the same even as Asianness and the game are mapped onto one another. How might this powerful "conceptual technology" construct the binaristic opposition of West versus East, US games versus non-US games, hardcore versus casual, competition versus cooperation, even as it evacuates game spaces by ostensibly rendering them neutral, level, and difference-blind?[9] How might this othering and orientalist logic be absorbed, encoded into the

bedrock of play, game design? Better yet, how might the gates and switches of who gets included or imagined narratively, representationally, and ludically be critiqued and challenged? In other words, what might it mean to suffer, survive, even surpass the "infinite penitence and sickness of the heart" of gaming while Asian?[10]

If you want answers, go to 3.
If you want to play a game, go to 8.
If you want to get some pizza instead, go to the next section.

2. Teen Night

I met my friends for "teen night" at the local Chuck E. Cheese. For a flat fee, we got all-you-can-eat pizza, fountain soda, and, of course, never-ending tokens for Skee-Ball and video games. It was the '80s. I was in middle school, and I remember it was a big deal that they played Michael Jackson's *Thriller* video on the big screen, which MTV could only air after nine o'clock because it was too scary for children. I also remember the arcade got a new game: *Dragon's Lair*. It was the first coin-operated video game to cost fifty cents to play.

Dragon's Lair (1983) was an interactive LaserDisc video game developed by Rick Dyer and Don Bluth. The game was basically a library of animated sequences or cutscenes that followed predetermined paths. The player "controlled" the protagonist Dirk the Daring by using the joystick to select a direction or by pressing an action button whenever the game flashed a cue; reflexes and timing were more important than the player's choices given that each track was scripted. Eventually, you could figure out the right path, the right script. In a sense, it looked like a movie, it played like a movie, and at the time, it was a very big deal.

I was terrible at the game. I was not living up to my Asian arcade expectations. The game also presented a different challenge, that of identification. *Dragon's Lair*'s teaser voice-over proclaimed the game was the "fantasy adventure where you become a valiant knight, on a quest to rescue the fair princess from the clutches of an evil dragon. You control the actions of a daring adventurer. . . . Lead on, adventurer. Your quest awaits!" Even at that tender age, I knew I was never going to be Dirk the Daring, especially since I could not get past the first handful of screens. If his quest was my quest, if his adventure was my adventure, what did it mean that I could not (or did not want to) rescue the princess? Dirk was the tall, dark-haired, square-jawed,

broad-shouldered, well-muscled fantasy hero. He was everything that I could never be not because I could not spend a fortune trying to master every jump, dodge, and action but because games—then and now—were not made for me. Since representation was not open to me, I was left with the second-class experience of identification. And if I could not identify, then I had to resign, be excluded from the fantasy.

If you decide to play a different game, go to 5.
If you go home to watch cartoons, go to 10.

3. Players

Sometime in 2016, a gaming meme circulated the highways and byways of the internet: an image in the style of motivational posters featuring a rectangular matrix of faces, of leading men from video games with the text "Video Game Protagonists: Kids Love Brown-Haired 30-Something White Males" on a black background. The disconnect between the demographics of gamers and the limited palette of playable characters is wide and telling. For instance, Dean Chan reveals, "Asian American gamers are, paradoxically, both hypervisible and out of sight," stereotyped as players of prowess or underexamined as a population.[11] With the rise of competitive video gaming and esports, Asian and Asian American players are being held up as poster children, even fetishized, becoming celebrities for their computer and console skills. These players take on and are mapped with a "ludic identity," as Christopher Patterson argues, that "reiterates techno-Orientalist racism . . . well suited for the programming and engineering labor of information technology" and thereby making "Asians appear magically fit for both e-sport success and model minority success."[12]

Meanwhile, a 2015 Nielsen study found that Asian Americans are "likely to feel video game characters are not inclusive. Almost half of these gamers believe all races aren't well represented in gaming character options, while less than a quarter think they are. On the other hand, Hispanics, African-Americans and non-Hispanic whites are much more positive about race representation."[13] In the same report, though Asian Americans are underrepresented in terms of characters, a majority are game players: "Asian-Americans are even more likely to game (81%), leading all other races and ethnicities: African-Americans are the next most likely (71%), followed by non-Hispanic whites (61%) and Hispanics (55%)."[14] What these statistics reveal is that the game of representation cannot be won by numbers alone, that inclusion in one arena often

means exclusion in another while simultaneously reinforcing dominant norms, stereotypes, and roles. But there is play in this contention, potential for rupture and resistance in the paradox. As Lisa Nakamura argues, "If gamers are themselves the source of some of the most virulent racist, sexist, and homophobic messages in videogames, they are also the source of some of the most ingenious and potent campaigns against them."[15]

If you want to compete, go to 6.
If you want to collaborate, go to 10.

4. Magic Circles

The "magic circle" of play, a too-often-cited concept from philosopher Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938), is the idea that games are not the same as and separate from real life, from the real world. Unfortunately, the magic circle (or its more vernacular invocation, "It's just a game!") has regularly been raised like a shield or force field to deflect or ignore analysis and critique, particularly from feminist, queer, and antiracist perspectives, and to perpetuate the commonsense dictums that games are only play, just for fun, and color-, gender-, queer-, and other differences–blind.[16] Video games, gaming, and playing are neither level nor neutral. As Mia Consalvo argues, "Players never play a new game or fail to bring outside knowledge about games and gameplay into their gaming situations. The event is 'tainted' perhaps by prior knowledge. There is no innocent gaming."[17] Understanding that games are not insulated or marked off from the real world and that the magic circle is permeable, imperfectly protecting some while leaving others out in the open, makes plain that "much of the pleasure of videogames comes at the expense of women and people of colour, both literally and figuratively."[18] In fact, the very foundations of Huizinga's ludic philosophy (among others) is predicated on what Tara Fickle calls "ludo-Orientalist" understandings; the magic circle takes "all the well-worn stereotypes of the Orientalist imaginary, seemingly emptied of both racial content and national context, being redeployed instead as formal qualities of the imaginative process called play."[19] The only "innocent" players and games are those who already benefit from power, privilege, who inhabit the ideal citizen gamer subject—one that is imagined as straight, white, male, masculine, affluent, and able-bodied, and whose identities, bodies, and worlds are not so easily appropriated or consumed as exotic, ethnic, alien, or other.

The End.

5. Yellow Wizard

One arcade game I enjoyed growing up was Atari's *Gauntlet* (1985), a fantasy dungeon crawler game that allowed up to four people to play at once. It was one of the first cooperative arcade games I had ever played. Players could pick one of four characters: Thor the warrior, Thyra the Valkyrie, Questor the Elf, and Merlin the wizard. I always played the wizard, preferring fighting at range and possessing the most powerful magic. The game's narrator would exclaim, "Warrior needs food" or "Elf shot the food" or "Valkyrie is about to die." In the game, each avatar was assigned a color: red for Thor, blue for Thyra, green for Questor, and yellow for Merlin. The irony of me playing a yellow wizard as an Asian man never escaped me, nor did the negative connotations of the color: cowardice, sickness, mental illness, excess. The physically weak magic user, standing in the back, reliant on mystical powers, overlaps too neatly with the stereotypical and yellow peril characterization of Asian bodies and identities as foreign, diseased, feminized, yet simultaneously dangerous and powerful. So ingrained and internalized are these connections, intentional or inadvertent, that I misremember the game narration as marking color and character: "Yellow wizard needs food, badly!" or "Yellow wizard shot the food" or "Yellow wizard is about to die."

> *If you decide to play a different game, go to 8.*
> *If you try to escape, go to 9.*
> *If you want to hunt a yeti, go to the next section.*

6. Choice

Every *Choose Your Own Adventure* book begins with the same preface: "BEWARE and WARNING! This book is different from other books. You and YOU ALONE are in charge of what happens in this story." Popular in the '80s and published by then Bantam Books, these compact "gamebooks" offered young readers the opportunity to take on the role of the protagonist. The books' second-person format hailed the reader to make a choice every few pages that would shuffle them to another page, another part of the story, another set of choices until they reached one of the many possible endings. When hitting a dead end or an undesirable ending, "reader-players" could backtrack, climb back up the narrative decision tree and take a different path down a different set of page numbers. Of course, the rhetoric and novelty of choice

would quickly lose their luster, given that while "the reader was indeed offered unprecedented interactive control by making a series of choices which determined the multiple endings he or she would reach, all the possible paths he or she could go down had been carefully chosen, designed and planned out by authors."[20] The interactive fallacy of the novels—which would be remediated into other mediums, particularly video games—promises reader and player the power to make decisions and affect outcomes, the authority of active exchange, even authorship (instead of passive consumption), even as that agency is a fantasy already constrained and contained by the top-down designs and structures of the text. This fantasy of choice belies what Eli Cook calls "a kind of neoliberal 'ground zero'" wherein *Choose Your Own Adventure* books were "one of the first important instances in which gamified notions of free, individual choice first came to shape mass culture in the United States."[21]

Of course, who is imagined and able to choose, even in a limited manner, often defaults to the cultural ideal and norm; as with video games, the imagined reader-player is young, white, straight, and male. According to R. A. Montgomery, one of the series founders and writers, "From the outset, we wanted *Choose Your Own Adventure* books to be non-gender specific. . . . It was a conscious decision."[22] However, the publisher would foil this decision by featuring cover and interior art that feature mostly boys as the protagonists. While the creators desired the books to be gender-neutral, the narratives relied on and continued other problematic definitions and tropes, particularly for adventure stories that perpetuated genre conventions that included "exotic" locales, Indigenous "savages," and non-Western culture. For example, starting in 2005, Chooseco reran and added to the *Choose Your Own Adventure* line with *The Abominable Snowman* by R. A. Montgomery as its number one volume. The prologue states, "You and your best friend Carlos have travelled to Nepal in search of the fabled Yeti or abominable snowman. Last year while the two of you were mountain climbing in South America, a guide told you about the legendary creature and you haven't stopped thinking about the Yeti since."[23] The plot of the novel begins with Carlos going missing. The reader-player must find him and the mysterious yeti. The book drips with orientalist imagery including drawings featuring pagodas, men and women with slanted eyes, Buddhas, and Bengal tigers. Down one of the narrative paths, the reader is taken to a mountain monastery where they are told, "Those who share the secret knowledge of the Yeti are pledged to reveal this knowledge only to appointed people. You, and you alone, are one of the appointed. It has been seen in the stars; it has been read in your hand."[24] The reader-player, making the right decision, then meets

a monk who dispenses sage advice, saying, "Listen well with heart, head, and body. Listen with eyes more than ears. Heed the cry of the *Yeti*."[25] One can hear the bamboo flute and *erhu* as the words are solemnly spoken. (Chooseco's company logo is for some reason a Chinese dragon in silhouette.)

Choice becomes the mechanism through which readers (and players) inhabit different possibilities, yet too often it becomes the game mechanic of what Lisa Nakamura calls "identity tourism."[26] In the case of *The Abominable Snowman*, mostly white readers get to "appropriate an Asian racial identity without any of the risks associated with being a racial minority in real life."[27] The power and privilege to choose is not evenly distributed even, or perhaps especially, in these gamebooks and games more generally. Moreover, who is represented and designed to be able to choose continues to reveal the ludo-orientalist history and "infrastructure of gaming itself as a raced project."[28] Ironically, in the quoted scene from *The Abominable Snowman*, the narrative itself reveals that the interactive fallacy constrains even the ideal citizen reader-player as the protagonist is told that they are chosen, that they can choose, yet all of this has been destined by signs and stars. In other words, there is no choice.

> *If you think you don't have a choice, go to the next section.*
> *If you really think you do have a choice, go to 4.*
> *If you don't know what to do, go to 12.*

7. Menu

100 REM Character Selection
105 PRINT "Which do you want to play?"
110 PRINT
115 PRINT "(M)onk"
120 PRINT "Nin(J)a"
125 PRINT "(K)ung Fu Master"
130 PRINT "(G)eisha"
135 PRINT "(D)ragon Lady"
140 PRINT "Computer (P)rogrammer"
145 PRINT "(S)py"
150 PRINT "(E)xchange Student"
155 PRINT "(F)ortune Cookie"
160 PRINT "(Y)ellow Fever"
165 PRINT "(N)o MSG"

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170 PRINT "(O)ther"
175 PRINT "Additional (C)hoices"
180 PRINT
185 INPUT "Select from above:"; BadChoice$
190 IF BadChoice$="M" THEN GOTO 8
195 IF BadChoice$="J" THEN GOTO 3
200 IF BadChoice$="K" THEN GOTO 8
205 IF BadChoice$="G" THEN GOTO 8
210 IF BadChoice$="D" THEN GOTO 3
215 IF BadChoice$="P" THEN GOTO 8
220 IF BadChoice$="S" THEN GOTO 13
225 IF BadChoice$="E" THEN GOTO 2
230 IF BadChoice$="F" THEN GOTO 12
235 IF BadChoice$="Y" THEN GOTO 5
240 IF BadChoice$="N" THEN GOTO 9
245 IF BadChoice$="O" THEN GOTO 4
250 REM Please Select Again
255 PRINT "That choice is not available to you. Please select again."
260 GOTO 100
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8. Yellow Face

Yellow Face is a text game by Mike Ren Yi released for the web and mobile devices in 2019. According to the developer's notes, it is "an interactive game about being Asian in America," based on a true story, and inspired by David Henry Hwang's play of the same name. The game begins with two facing faces in profile: the one on the left is white, the one on the right is pale yellow, with text bubbles, choices, and a curious "American/Asian" status bar at the top of the screen. The start screen sets the scene: "A college house party in America, 2009; music and indistinct chatter spill from the speakers." Then the first interaction appears as the "White Guy" asks, "Where are you from?" You, as the player-character, have two choices: "North Carolina" and "China." Clicking "North Carolina" elicits the cringe-worthy follow-up question, "No I mean where are you REALLY from?" The remainder of the game moves through a few other interlocutors including a "White Girl" and an Asian girl named "Anna." Different conversation paths reveal further racist and orientalist replies, from "Chinese culture is so zen" to "Do a karate chop" to "I'm not into Asian guys."

1.1. White and Asian faces talking. Screenshot of *Yellow Face*.

The game dramatizes not only the everyday micro- and macro-aggressions experienced by Asian and other racialized bodies but gestures at the critical potential of games that do more than treat race as a ludic or representational fantasy. What is illuminating about *Yellow Face* is its weaving of the "Where are you from?" conversation so often rehearsed by Asian bodies in white spaces with two curious mechanics. The first is the "American/Asian" status bar (see figure 1.1), which measures how American (i.e., white) or how Asian (i.e., yellow) your responses are perceived to be. The "American" bar critiques the conflation of nationality and citizenship with whiteness and assimilation, recognizing the discursive and ludic violence and impossibility of ever being fully accepted or integrated into normative belonging. Rather than read the mechanic as attempting to quantify "Asianness" (or "Americanness") in a real way, I read it as the algorithmic visualization of the "Where are you from?" game that, as Tara Fickle confirms, "Asian American experience of being made to feel like a 'perpetual foreigner' regardless of birthplace or citizenship" reveals the cultural and procedural logic of Asian American representation as "itself a game."[29] *Yellow Face* shows how the ludic here becomes a way of "representing the problematics of representation in the first place."[30] The second mechanic, bound up with the first, is the way the game takes advantage of the constraints of decision trees, limiting the player to scant choices or a complete lack of adequate responses. There are no good choices, and the player-character ultimately "loses" the "Where are you from?" game trapped

in the double-bind and double-consciousness of the gap between Asian and American. Moreover, the "Where are you from?" game critiques a racist temporality and geography that fixes Asian bodies in white spaces only in the past from which they arrived in the United States and forecloses on the present and future. Both mechanics create the illusion that *Yellow Face* is a game that can be won, and like the "Where are you from?" game, there are no good choices.

If you stay at the party, go to 4.
If you zone out to the music, go to 12.
If you decide to leave the party and head into the backyard, go to 13.

9. Game Space

Game spaces, the space *in* games, the space *of* games, is highly regulated, fraught, and always normed. Game space as open, free, and politically or ideologically neutral is a fantasy. McKenzie Wark in *Gamer Theory* (2007) argues, "The game has not just colonized reality, it is also the sole remaining ideal. . . . The reigning ideology imagines the world as a *level playing field*, upon which all folks are equal before God, the great game designer. . . . Everything is evacuated from an empty space and time which now appears natural, neutral, and without qualities—a gamespace."[31] Even gaming spaces themselves, be they at home, at work, in an arcade, around a table, in a back room, in front of a screen, or on a field, divide, discriminate, and define who is a player, who gets to play, what are the rules, what are the boons, and more importantly, who is *not* a player, who does not get to play, who makes the rules, and what are the consequences of winning, losing, and breaking the rules. And since job, school, family, health, leisure, even romance have increasingly become gamified, these problematic logics perpetuate the embedded inequalities and ludic biases already at play in everyday life. Wark continues, "The real world appears as a video arcadia divided into many and varied games. Work is a rat race. Politics is a horse race. The economy is a casino. . . . These games are no joke. When the screen flashes the legend *Game over*, you are either dead, or defeated, or at best out of quarters."[32] Even the language of success, sustainability, and survival has been algorithmically and ludically inflected and reveals the near impossibility for marginalized bodies and identities to compete in, much less win, the game of living.

The End.

10. Roles

In the colorful intro to the 1980s cartoon series *Dungeons and Dragons*, six friends are transported from an amusement park ride to the fantasy realm of *D&D*. Each is then given a magical item befitting their role. The Dungeon Master, their guide, names them in a creaky, sagely voice, "Fear not, Ranger, Barbarian, Magician, Thief, Cavalier, and Acrobat." The animated series was my first introduction to *Dungeons and Dragons* and the idea and pleasure of character creation, of playing a class, of being a type. The cartoon provided templates for a range of characters but more importantly established an early taxonomy of what characters I might be. Alas, I did not see myself as the blond and brawny Hank the Ranger or Bobby the Barbarian, who was only eight years old. Fabulous were Sheila the Thief and Diana the Acrobat (notably the only character of color on the show), but they were not me either. What did that leave me? The spoiled coward Eric the Cavalier or Presto the bumbling fool of a Magician. I did like Presto the best. Of course, the only main character that actually looked anything like me was Venger the Villain with his vampiric face and slanted eyes. Once again, I could only aspire to whiteness or be despised. Once again, the burden of identification fell to the body not shown, the player not seen, recognizing that most of the time one could not play as or like oneself. I learned these limits of identification early on, often abandoning them, and found other ways to smuggle myself into the scene and in between the lines. Better yet, I created my own world, my own rules. It would be years, many in fact, before I would realize that the one character I at the time never imagined I could inhabit would be the role I now love best: the Dungeon Master.

If you need food badly, go to 5.
If you are looking for players to start a new game, go to 3.
If you decide you'd rather join an existing game, go to the next section.

11. d20

On the hardcover front of the handbook:
a man in a winged helm, bastard sword
aloft, stalwart, muscular, even in armor,
astride a horse in a dun caparison, charging.
Even then I could not see myself as he.

Perhaps I was in the back, in the appendices,
an apprentice, young, scared, sad, small,
hungry, queer, Asian, overweight, hiding,
boxed in by burdened, humid homosociality,
chainmail bikinis, and dice rolls for dick size.
But with the master's tools I made a place
for myself, found ways to pass, hope, pretend:
he was Agicanus, she was named Ayecleare,
he was bitter, sorcerous, ambitious, alone,
she was righteous, wise, glowing, healing.
He loved her but like a brother, partner, teacher.
She loved him, though *not* like a sister, and knew
he poured himself into his studies, his magic
to escape that which he could not know or name.
I saw myself as he, as they, waiting, wishing.[33]

If you want to read the rulebook, go to 7.
If you want to hide in the closet, go to 4.
If you want to make a wish, go to 14.

12. Maze

You are in a text of twisty little paragraphs.

If you are lost, go to 9.
If you are not lost, go to 12.
If you want to be told where to go, go to 7.
If you want to decide where to go, go to wherever you'd like.

13. Infinite Intimacy

Robert Yang's *Intimate, Infinite* (2014) is a reimagining of Jorge Luis Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths," mixing first-person shooter (FPS), walking simulator, puzzle, and role-playing game. The title screen calls *Intimate, Infinite* a "series of games," a set of interconnected minigames "about gardening, chess, history, infinity, and a murder," which play with time, cause and effect, genre, and mechanics. The player is thrust *in medias res* into

story and action finding themselves on a dirt road at night, standing over a dead body and gun, being chased by dogs and assailants. Picking up the gun reveals that it is out of ammunition; the expectation is that the player will have to look for and find bullets, but this FPS trope ends being a red herring. Instead, the player-character must run down the road to catch a train about to depart. The player is then taken to the countryside where they eventually find the locked gate to a manor house. The character laments, "I had no key . . . in this life at least." And then the player is taken back to the start screen where they can choose which game, which path, which fork to play next: find a way through garden labyrinth, engage in a glass of wine and game of chess, or return to the chase. Playing one part changes a different part; revisiting a section reveals new details, openings, and possibilities. The game takes to heart "The Garden of Forking Path"'s notion of "an infinite series of times, in a dizzily growing, ever spreading network of diverging, converging and parallel times."[34] In other words, what is not accomplished in one game, in one life, might be accomplished in another.

While not faithful to Borges's short story, the series of games still imagines a Chinese spy who must send word to the German army by killing a British sinologist. However, Yang's beautifully rendered and atmospheric cycle of games offers two provocations. First, in the encounter between Wang and Alber (analogs for Borges's Tsun and Albert), Yang queers the narrative and suggests in one of the lives of the characters they were lovers, not just enemies. This potential is revealed via a brief text and cutscene where Wang acknowledges the relationship (see figure 1.2). Yang writes, "It's also not much of a stretch to read this as a gay relationship between two men arguing about secrecy and shame and possibility. In one of these infinite realities, they are friends—and in another, maybe they are lovers . . . I made this gay subtext more obvious in my game, depending on the randomization [of cutscenes] you get when playing."[35] Second, *Intimate, Infinite* critiques the medium of video games and the interactive fantasy of choice, power, and control. Yang says, "There might be endless dimensions of existence, but as humans, we only experience one. Each time you read this story, it will always be the same story with the same ending, no matter what the ideas promise. The spy will always shoot the sinologist. I push this interpretation in my game: once you shoot my Alber, he's dead in the title screen, hub screen, chess section as well."[36] The game reflects on the explanation of the garden in the short story: "In all fiction, when a

man is faced with alternatives he chooses one at the expense of others. In the most unfathomable, Ts'ui Pen, he chooses—simultaneously—all of them. He thus *creates* various, various times which start others that will in their turn branch out and bifurcate in other times."[37] Yang's game extends this critique of choice and branching futurities as they intersect with race and nationality commenting on the orientalist relationship between the main character and the sinologist. Yang notes, "It takes a Magical White Guy . . . to make Tsun interested in his own culture again. . . . This Chinese guy has to murder this British guy to supposedly prove to the Germans that the Chinese are a civilized sophisticated people capable of resourcefulness and creativity. . . . There are only two people who know about the Garden, and by the end of the story, they are both dead."[38] Like the garden, like the game, the orientalist logic becomes a trap, a dead end, or at the very least, a fantasy relationship between a fictive West and East, between normative agency and racialized subordination.

If you want to be infinite, go to 1.
If you want to be intimate, go to the next section.
If you want to end the game, go to 15.

1.2. The character of Wang. Screenshot of *Intimate, Infinite*.
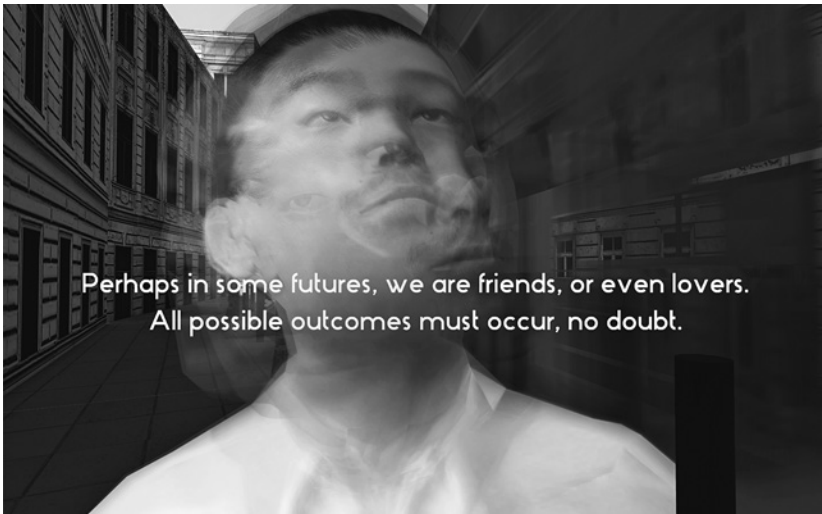
14. Hope

I did not start playing tabletop role-playing games till I was well into tenth grade; I was a gaming late bloomer.[39] My first RPG systems are now considered classics: *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* (also known as Second Edition), *Stormbringer*, *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game*, *Call of Cthulhu*, and *Champions*. In high school, gaming was an escape, a chance to be someone else and somewhere else. I always played healers or mages, characters that stood in the back, provided support, yet were necessary, even crucial in just the right circumstances. A long weekend's marathon full of dice rolls, smudged character sheets, and Jolt cola bought me respite from the pains of being a shy, overweight, closeted young man of color; it brought me community, camaraderie, and the first thrill of falling in love with one's game master (though not for the last time). For many years, I would be the only nonwhite and openly queer player at the table. In college, gaming became less about escape and more about exploring, about self-expression. College and graduate school is when I discovered live-action role-playing games, when I started tinkering with my own game designs, and when I started learning to be comfortable in my own skin. I also realized that I had a talent for game mastering, for creating and communicating worlds, which dovetailed with my growing aptitude for teaching, for finding confidence at the front of a classroom.

Looking back, I can honestly say that gaming was one of the things that saved my life. It inspired my writing and catalyzed my profession. Gaming is living, loving, learning, and sometimes grieving and coping and escaping. Gaming informs so much of who I am, what I do, and what I believe and fight for. Gaming, in a deep sense then, is practicing utopia and transforming dystopia. It is a longing for a world yet to come; it is a hoping for a world better than this one. Gaming allows us to inhabit the possible and imagine the impossible.

If you want to watch the credits, go to the next section.

Notes

1 Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," 93.

2 Aarseth, *Cybertexts*, 3.

3 M.-L. Wong, "The Garden of Living Paths," 104, 106.

4 For more on techno-orientalism, see Roh, Huang, and Niu, *Techno-Orientalism*.

5 Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," 94.

6   Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," 91.

7   Fickle, *The Race Card*, 3.

8   Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," 101, 92.

9   Fickle, *The Race Card*, 14.

10 Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," 101.

11 D. Chan, "Being Played," para. 1.

12 Patterson, *Open World Empire*, 62, 64.

13 "How Diverse Are Video Games," paras. 3–4.

14 "How Diverse Are Video Games," para. 5.

15 Nakamura, "User-Generated Media Campaigns," 11.

16 For more on antifeminist, antiqueer, and racist backlashes in gaming cultures, see Quinn, *Crash Override*; Condis, *Gaming Masculinity*; Phillips, *Gamer Trouble*; and Gray and Leonard, *Woke Gaming*.

17 Consalvo, "There Is No Magic Circle," 415.

18 Nakamura, "User-Generated Media Campaigns," 9.

19 Fickle, *The Race Card*, 123.

20 Cook, "Rearing Children of the Market in the 'You' Decade," 23.

21 Cook, "Rearing Children of the Market in the 'You' Decade," 17.

22 Hendrix, "Choose Your Own Adventure."

23 Montgomery, *The Abominable Snowman*.

24 Montgomery, *The Abominable Snowman*, 26.

25 Montgomery, *The Abominable Snowman*, 40.

26 Nakamura, *Cybertypes*.

27 Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, 40.

28 Fickle, *The Race Card*, 3.

29 Fickle, *The Race Card*, 13.

30 Fickle, *The Race Card*, 13.

31 Wark, *Gamer Theory*, 8.

32 Wark, *Gamer Theory*, 6.

33 This is a stanza from E. Y. Chang, "Dice."

34 Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," 100.

35 Yang, "Liner Notes: *Intimate, Infinite* (Part 2)."

36 Yang, "Liner Notes: *Intimate, Infinite* (Part 1)."

37 Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," 98.

38 Yang, "Liner Notes: *Intimate, Infinite* (Part 2)."

39 Adapted from E. Y. Chang, "Playing Games, Practicing Utopia."