

Thick Aesthetics in Artist Game *Fantastic STIs 18 to 81*

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Keywords

Queer game design, Thick aesthetics, STI and HIV representation, Personal narrative in gameplay, Cultural identity in games

Format of work

A web-based game: <https://ffmaer.itch.io/fantastic>

DESCRIPTION OF WORK

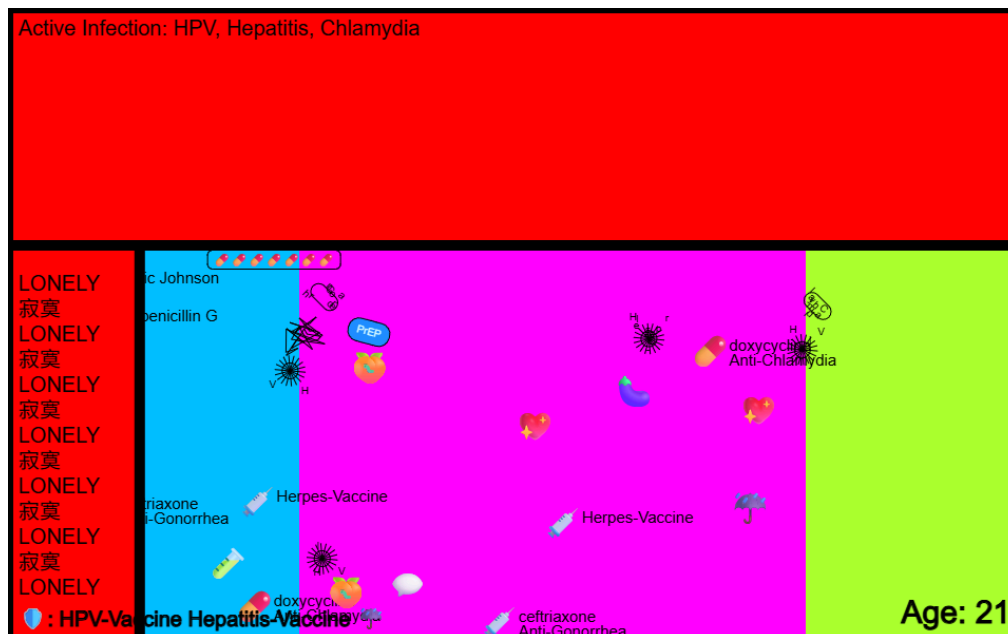


Figure 1: A screenshot of the game in action

Fantastic STIs 18 to 81 is a game that explores love, loneliness, and STI threats, mirroring real-world science and social issues, including the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Players navigate an 18-year-old's life, with each year offering chances for love and sex, symbolized by hearts, peaches, and eggplants. The game also features symbols for viruses/bacteria; syringes, condoms, test tubes, chat bubbles, and pills; and swimmers/candle lights representing HIV-positive celebrities (e.g., Freddie Mercury) and organizations like ACT UP that fought the virus. Players control a chaotic, shifting-line character using ASDW keys, a familiar keyboard setup. Developed with JavaScript, this web-based game is portable, lightweight, accessible, and easy to archive. Created by me, a self-funded, solo, brown queer, generative artist, the game utilizes only emojis and code-generated visuals, reflecting an algorithist aesthetic (Verostko 1994). This mirrors many queer indie games: small-scale, low-budget,

Thick Aesthetics in Identity & Culture Awareness

As the player swims towards an old age, they encounter well-known HIV+ people who have completed their journeys, along with the names of organizations and individuals who fought against the HIV pandemic. This signals that navigating love and loneliness amidst STIs may seem solitary, but it is a journey shared by many and has marks in the culture.

Although the game is primarily in English, it features a repeating Chinese word 寂寞, which means loneliness. This adds a decorative element of mystery for non-Chinese players, but its primary goal is to highlight the artist's cultural identity. It points to the overarching theme of his art practice: exploring the intersection of two identities—being gay and Chinese. Furthermore, the artist contributed his voice to create sound effects, adding a personal touch to the game's sonic aesthetic.

Thick Aesthetics in Design Details

Thick aesthetics of *Fantastic STIs 18 to 81* come from its charming small design details that “[grounds it] in the more nuanced realm of experience” (Sharp 2015, 77). For instance, starting a conversation about STIs or undergoing STI tests—scenarios that can be awkward and challenging in real life—are represented within the game. When the player collides with the text bubbles or test tubes, and if there are hidden worms, representing STIs, in the eggplants or peaches, the worms will reveal themselves inside the peaches or eggplants after a few seconds.

Accidental contact with HIV triggers a 10-second countdown. Reaching PEP pills in time prevents HIV infection; otherwise, the player becomes infected. This mimics the real-life urgency of seeking PEP after unsafe sex, reflecting the ongoing anxiety and critical need to end the HIV pandemic, even though its peak is past.

Thick Aesthetics in the Meaning of Play

The topic of STIs, especially HIV, is serious and socially sensitive. In light of this seriousness, a lively game has been created to boost people's confidence and encourage them to confront the virus, bacteria, and stigma with courage. If the player can see threats as challenges in a game with a playful spirit, they are on a path to becoming invincible. Playing in *Fantastic STIs 18 to 81* is not trivializing a serious topic or making mindless fun out of a dire situation, but rather instilling a fighter's bravery in the hearts of the players. The role of play, “one of the important aspects of thick aesthetics in games and art (Sharp 2015, 81),” is monumental in *Fantastic STIs 18 to 81*, making the game's aesthetics sophisticated and, therefore, thick.

Significance

This avant-garde queer game, created by an individual fine artist, explores a minority group's experience with STIs. It showcases a sophisticated understanding of the medium, imbuing deep meaning into play and game mechanisms, creating a nuanced experience. The design is rich with personal identity and cultural awareness, exemplifying "thick aesthetics."

EXHIBITION

The work, accessible through the URL fmaer.itch.io/fantastic, will be displayed full-screen on a laptop with Wi-Fi. Audiences can interact with the work using the keyboard of the laptop computer. The laptop computer will be placed on a table, with two chairs provided for seating. Sound will emit from the laptop speakers. A solo game, but better as a duet. An additional player observing the infection status can verbally assist the main player, creating a social gaming experience.

BIO

TengChao (TC) Zhou is a PhD researcher at Monash Art, Design & Architecture and SensiLab. His research intersects video games, fine arts, queer theory, and generative AI. This paper is part of his ongoing PhD work on how artists incorporate broader cultural contexts, personal identities, narrative, and game mechanisms into the meaning of video games, creating thick aesthetics with video games.

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