perimortem (in [theoretical] rigor)
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Vanakkam, hello, welcome. Before I begin, if you like, you can download a blank 21x21 point lattice from Google Drive and use it to "digitally" map the topology of the (partial) text as I orally present it. If you create a labyrinth kolam using this grid, I invite you to send it to me with a list of points in the order that your line enclosed them—in the spirit of relationality, I would love to encode your path into the digital game, with credit to you and the Computers and Writing community.

>warning
This text contains references to and descriptions of ableism, bodily fluids, death, genocide, intergenerational trauma, medical procedures, pain, racism, rape, self-harm, and torture. Specific content warnings will be identified before moments that contain sensitive content. Please engage as you are able.

First, let me echo TCU's acknowledgment of the many benefits, responsibilities, and relationships of being in this place, which we share with all living beings. I respectfully acknowledge all Native American peoples who have lived on this land since time immemorial. TCU especially acknowledges and pays respect to the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes, upon whose historical homeland the university is located.

[*warning: genocide, police brutality*]

Let me also echo Native poet CMarie Fuhrman (2021) and acknowledge how we ignore Indigenous relationships with land when we say that ancestral lands have been stolen, because it's the people who have been stolen from their land—swiftly, brutally, fatally. Let us acknowledge that settlers get cemeteries, while Indigenous people get archaeological dig sites and museums; Eelam Tamil bodies get mass graves and desecration; Palestinians get crushed by the weight of their homes; social media stoked the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya; almost all modern technology requires materials stained with Congolese blood. That I'm flanked by university campuses whose latest renovation projects involved student blood, bones, teeth. That it's more convenient to declare the pandemic over, letting the death toll rise, than continue to enforce public health mitigation measures.

We compose and play many games that— through player choice, pure process, and player interpretation—manufacture consent for massacres, eugenics, and the primacy of Eurocentric knowledge models. I can't passively witness genocide after genocide, like the Tamil genocide of 2009, but established scholars insist on telling me the university is apolitical, aseptic. *Don't project your pain on us in here*, a.k.a., *What the fuck is wrong with you,* never mind that our fields, and academic culture writ large, do violence, every day. As Trammell (2023) contends, torture is under-theorized in play theory—and I'd add, digital rhetoric—and "to forget this is to aestheticize the experience of play and to resign ourselves to the norms of White supremacy" (p. 110).

Let's not kid ourselves. I write this knowing that I'm the kind of bodymind that's supposed to quietly disappear.

>about

[*image*: Inform 7 source code and story, displaying prologue, metadata, and current location, "Sterile Zone."]

[*warning: dissection*]

You are in the operating theatre. On the autopsy table lies the body of a brown-skinned woman with a curly black faux-hawk, tattoos, and a yawning Y-incision in her abdomen, the flaps raw and wet. Her open eyes are fixed on the ceiling, her expression tense but not yet fixed by rigor. You wouldn't think from her face that her anatomy contains landmines.

You were called in to prospect the body, using a variation of the traditional walk-over survey: walking your fingers across the slippery terrain of her interior to mark unexploded ordnances in white surveyor's chalk, obtaining samples with a hand auger.

You might have feigned reluctance when they scouted you for the job, fussing over the negligible honorarium and primitive tools, but the truth is you enjoy getting your hands dirty. There's nothing quite like burying your arms elbow-deep in the primal muck of discovery, being the first one to domesticate what you find.

There are two outcomes for the body on the table: resuscitation or destruction, depending on the number of explosives you diagram, which depends on how dangerous you deem her to be. Your perimortem examination of the body is guided by these two questions: What do you mark as suspect? What bombs do you leave intact?

Please assess each of the following 54 items on a sheet of paper as "Mine" or "Not Mine." Whether it's a claymore or a possessive pronoun is up to you.

(-1,-7) Haunting, Navigation, and Memory

[*image*: Inform 7 story, displaying player advancement from Minefield: Entrance to Minefield to here.]

"In torture, the world is reduced to a single room or set of rooms" (Scarry, 1985, p. 42). *Safe house* is a cross-cultural torturer's idiom for this room. Every conceivable aspect of the room, the objects in it, the fact of civilization, become agents of pain and are annihilated as they participate in the annihilation of the tortured. The domestic act of protecting becomes an act of hurting (p. 40).

[*warning: torture*]

In Sri Lanka, during the war and since its end in 2009, safe houses—and other secret or known detention sites—are used by security forces to detain and interrogate Tamils, sometimes with domestic objects from pins to electrical cords (HRW, 2021). Euro-Western universities, colonial purveyors of morality, taste, decency, and other civilizing impulses, are just as safe, though their currency is symbolic. If the text is my soulbody, Euro-Western, ableist method is the apparatus of capture that drives me to the safe house, blindfolds me, ties my ankles to the ceiling and hoods me, all on suspicion of doing and being wrong.

(8,7) Design, Navigation, and Rigor

[*image*: A printed computer-generated labyrinth kolam, with "modular" kolams outlined in red and blue, with my penciled notes in the margins.]

Between Tamil literacy's emphasis on ambiguity, interpretive puzzles, and emergent meaning-making and a cognition fractured by pain, fatigue, and trauma, I can't pre-compose any other way. No matter the medium, my "zero" drafts are exercises in Eelam Tamil ecofeminist literacy, digital geometric thinking that is graphic, sonic, land- and community-based, embodied, combinatorial, participatory, playful—tortured.

Following writers like Raymond Queneau, Julio Cortazar, Italo Calvino—members of the Oulipo school, which saw promise in the convergence of mathematics and literature—this body appears formally constrained yet liberated through constraint. The slick topology your fingers slide through is the diagram of a 21x21 Fibonacci labyrinth *kolam*, an ancient Tamil aesthetic, religious, and cultural practice that involves a closed-loop line drawing on a point lattice (Psarra, 2018; Nagarajan, 2019).

Traditionally created with white rice flour on the veranda, kolam-making is an "ecofeminist computational art practice that intertwines embodiment, emotion, and sociality in relationally meaningful ways" (Kannabiran & Reddy, 2022, p.4). Its topological concordance, symbolizing the concordances of bodily pain, spiritual pain, and ecological relationships with land, environments, people, is based on relations of adjacency among constituent kolams, symmetrical points, and repeating names, representing conceptual relationships across a single, visually graspable object (Psarra, 2018, §4.4, ¶5).

(4,7) Emergence, Navigation, and Rigor

Numeric-thematic concordance manifests in coordinates and repeating titles, which identify the precise position of each potential landmine in the slick interior of this body. Your initial sweep discovered a grid of hard nodules, 21 high and 21 across, haptically letting you visualize her body—and all its disparate biohazards—as a geometric notation, a Fibonacci kolam. If you really wanted to, you could wash the gore from your hands, draw this 21x21 point lattice on paper and plot each coordinate to perceive the narrative armature as a single, visually represented object, figure out how to draw a line that loops around each point, in order, forms an Euler circuit, and closes the loop at the end. Intuitive modes of perception are interwoven with analytic forms of understanding. You can see how, in Psarra's (2018) words, "the network 'gets into' the text; how the step-by-step experience of reading the fiction with its images, ideas, inversions, transpositions and pleasures enables us to grasp the notation as a particular mode of explaining the fiction" (§4.4, ¶8).

You could make the kolam, but will you? It says something about your perception of digital multimodal composition, if such work seems uninteresting, unrewarding, undermining.

(4,4) Emergency and Exactitude

[*warning*: *academic ableism*]

Years ago, I asked established scholars for advice on how to effectively use digital interactive formats to produce the unpleasant, undesirable affects associated with chronic pain, chronic fatigue, and intergenerational trauma. To me, interactivity, poetics, and combinatorial constraints constitute the most sensible, least hypocritical approach to authentically writing about Eelam Tamil American chronic pain, but most people recoil, saying: It's unethical to harm the reader; there's no way to simulate pain without ethically harming the reader, in a tone like I should know better. They suggest I stop obsessing over form and just write.

For years, I feel "good-girled" (Tuck & Ree, 2013) away from doing justice to the trifecta of embodied, diasporic, and academic chronic pain—as in, be a good South Asian girl: forgive, behave.

(4,8) Emergence, Design, and Rigor

After I read Maier et al.'s (2020) discussion of the fractal as a "theory-in-motion"—one that illustrates "both the distinctiveness and interconnectedness of trans, disabled, LGBQ experiences as well as the logics that inform racism, misogyny, and settler colonialism. Fractals inform textual structures and the development of literary genres. But what if fractals also structure social worlds, historical and rhetorical forces, and struggles for power?" (para. 6)—I start thinking about enacting kolam as the grammar or notation of a text.

(4,6) Emergence, Torture, and Rigor

Torture *is* play, and it's limiting to pretend otherwise. Its cruel pleasures manifest in schoolyard bullying, academic abuse, the colonial project of play (Trammell, 2023). That is: Whose stories do we center in spaces that curate digital games and play? Whose pain? Who's granted agency? Who has the luxury of preaching nonviolence? Whose violent actions, past or present, are narratively justified, laundered, romanticized, forgiven? Whose wounds are reopened for years by the implied suffering of even minor 16-bit NPC sprites whose bodies might be bloodless? Who commits harm and forgets about it the next day? How does privileging Eurocentric academic norms in digital composition—the bourgeois moralizing aversion to pain—import and legitimize the cruel pleasures above?

(6,7) Torture, Navigation, and Rigor

[*warning*: *genocide*]

Pacifism is a core tenet of many of the games I grew up playing. The successor to Mega Man, X is a reluctant soldier whose olive branches are universally rejected. *King's Quest 1* awards more points for nonviolent solutions, lays the guilt on thick if you choose to kill. Better to trust that you can outwit your enemies, as though a moment's trickery precludes violent retaliation.

I enjoy these games, but they aren't for me. Genocides, like the anti-Tamil violence of Black July 1983, aren't retaliation. They can't be prevented with an olive branch or non-violent protest. The reality is that those July massacres weren't mob retaliation for the Tamil Tigers' killing of 13 soldiers; they were already planned, weapons stockpiled, target addresses aggregated from voter registrations, killers recruited, security forces informed to stand down. Only the signal was needed. Decades of nonviolence yielded deaths, rapes, and displacement. All with the Sri Lankan state's blessing, without any mercy.

These are games for people who guilelessly believe mercy prevents violence. A digital design ethos that revolves around pacifism is for scholars who believe that nonviolence solves all evils and that everyone believes this.

(7,6) Navigation, Torture, and Rigor

[***warning****: racism*]

Daniel-Wariya and Sanchez (2019) define ambient rhetorical actions as "actions in video games that transpire without user input but create a general rhetorical atmosphere wherein racial ideologies are encoded and articulated" (p. 138). This includes rhetorical designs and interactions that romanticize white saviorism, depict white European colonization as a necessary intervention in barbaric spaces, and align the player with imperialist, self-indulgent fantasies around wartime atrocities, justice, and accountability.

Encoded into games by programmers and designers, this insidious amplification of colonialist ideologies reifies the importance of making players from colonizing states comfortable. The status quo must be reinforced. *Final Fantasy IV*'s protagonist Cecil commits war crimes at the start of the game, but defeating his inner evil absolves both him and players predisposed to forgiving people who were just following orders. The way we're meant to forgive people when their inflexible adherence to academic style and legitimacy harms BIPOC and disabled rhetors.

(7,7) Split Navigation and Rigor

[*image*: Lavannya Suressh's taxonomy of 6 types of kolam tiles in different orientations, followed by the incomplete path traced through the kolam notation for this text.]

You trace your path from just above the node you mark as (0,0) on your mine clearance map. If the work weren't so bloody, it would almost be playful. As it stands, you transfer gore onto your pen every time you switch from the body's interior to your field notebook. If your first loop is shape type 4 in Suressh's (2021) taxonomy, you can create closed loops around 54 nodes in under an hour. You arrive at a compilation of utterances that is incomplete but still "a combinatorial game that pursues the possibilities implicit in its own material, independent of the personality of the poet [...] a game that at a certain point is invested with an unexpected meaning" (Calvino, 1986, p. 20).

What else the body has to say beyond that, across all 441 points, you can't say right now. And what she says by the end will vary, depending on how many nodes you call bombs.

(8,6) Design, Torture, Rigor

[*warning*: *blood, cutting, torture*]

Scarry (1985) describes writing about torture: "Place the injured body several inches in front of our eyes, hold the light up to the injured flesh, and keep steady the reader's head so that he cannot turn away" (p. 65).

[*image*: Inform 7 story, displaying progression to this point, the player input >*cut body*, and the machine's reply: "You prod the body's cheek with the scalpel's tip. She doesn't move. Curious, you cut a line along the crease of the body's inner elbow. A thick bead of blood follows the blade, fattens, runs in a curtain down her arm."]

(8,8) Dual Design and Rigor

Computational rhetorics and prosody first join hands in ancient Sanskrit texts (Knuth, 2006; Kannabiran & Reddy, 2022). Rhythm is transferred between flesh and earth in kolam art, mathematically mapped sentences, geometric notations, the syncopations of chronic pain, the location of the poetic twist, line breaks whose staggered lengths form the lordotic

curve of Batticaloa, my ancestral land. In the language-game that is poetics, meter is an embodied, affective transmission, a culturally specific literacy for some of us.

(8,9) Design, Contingency, and Rigor

[*image*: A website with a coral menu and cream background, the content interrupted by a hyperlinked Tamil phrase.]

In this born-digital introductory chapter, I perform and undermine what Scarry (1985) calls the "language-destroying" (p. 19) property of pain through a series of <<link reveal>> macros in Twine. The formal constraint I digitally composed under: Every time chronic pain or trauma affectively interjected, I solidified and materialized the disruption with a <<link reveal>> anchored in broad-spectrum Tamil exclamations whose range captures everything: startlement, backaches, news of another Tamil university student's torture. *Aiyo*.

Disruption is a central practice of torture. Bodyminds acclimate to anything inflicted with regular periodicity. A predictable rhythm becomes meditative, white noise. Irregular rhythms—those that run counter to expected cultural formations, like speech or song structures—are the textual equivalent of noise torture, prolonging disorientation, tantamount to a cerebral assault. Writing like this formally materializes the irregular periodicity of chronic pain (or other bodily anomalies) and of torture, repairing digital composition for diasporic-disabled composers like me.

(8,10) Design, Healing, and Rigor

[*image*: A young Tamil woman makes a labyrinth kolam (photo credit: Lee Swenson).]

Kolam is a Tamil word that enmeshes play with form, beauty, disguise, and mathematical ritual design (Nagarajan, 2019, p. 2). It refers to the ancient Tamil folk art and cultural practice of greeting the dawn with ephemeral geometric or figurative designs, typically composed of closed lines interwoven around a point lattice, made with rice flour on the threshold before the doorway. Each design variant has its own syntax, like *pulli* (meaning dot) kolams. Also called labyrinth kolams, they involve a point lattice and a continuous line forming a closed-loop, symmetrical design.

A point lattice guides this text. A labyrinth built for me to escape from, for everyone else to find their own path. This ethos exceeds what the Western cybertext has to offer.

(9,7) Contingency, Navigation, and Rigor

[*image*: A kolam attempt in which shoulder pain distracted me, and my line dead-ended.]

Kolam-making cultivates geometric thinking as part of a digital design ethos and physical, cognitive, and spiritual flexibility. Even in relatively straightforward designs, glitches are a given. Artists might accidentally misdirect the line, dead-ending the game, or the line might hiccup due to the artist's physical infirmities or irregularities in the rice flour or earth. The point lattice facilitates the effective troubleshooting of problems that arise during the design's execution (Malls, 2007, p. 65). Being able to grasp the design as a single, infinitely transformable geometric object facilitates ad hoc adjustments or complete renovations of the original pattern. The more my disabled mind goes, the closer I come to disappearing, the more I *need* something I can grasp.

(10,4) Healing, Emergence, and Security

Like Calvino (1986), I too luxuriate in the "relief and sense of security that I feel every time I discover that a mess of vague and indeterminate lines turns out to be a precise geometric form; or every time I succeed in discerning a series of facts and choices to be made of a finite number of possibilities, in the otherwise shapeless avalanche of events. Faced with the vertigo of what is countless, unclassifiable, in a state of flux, I feel reassured by what is finite, 'discrete,' and reduced to a system" (p. 15).

(-9,4) Contingency, Emergence, Relationality

Sensorily, socially, and medically, chronic pain lends itself to rhizomatic, syncopated, randomized configurations of digital composition. Order matters in its not-mattering. New combinations of bodily intensities and new juxtapositions of textual pieces both yield new emergent meanings, pleasurable and painful. In visually representing all this, kolam grammar lets me grasp my whole diasporic-disabled identity as a single object—as it should be. As a map to a digital text adventure, it translates the text into a subtly Tamil combinatorial play of narrative possibilities: that is, "the spirit in which one reads is decisive: it is up to the reader to see to it that literature exerts its critical force" (Calvino, 1986, p. 22).

(-7,2) Navigation, Spite, Disguise

Tuck and Ree (2013): "In telling you all of this in this way, I am resigning myself and you to the idea that parts of my telling are confounding. I care about you understanding, but I care more about concealing parts of myself from you. I don't trust you very much. You are not always aware of how you can be dangerous to me, and this makes me dangerous to you" (p. 640).

(-5,4) Luxury, Emergence, and Relationality

Malls (2007) observes that women use *varum*, *it will come*, as an idiom when discussing kolam designs, referring to the emergence of a pattern, and the faith that it will come. *Varum* conveys the sense that the intended design is not wholly given even when planned and rehearsed and may not be the final form of the pattern. Preparation is important, but the pattern that comes will come.

(1,7) Haunting, Navigation, and Contagion

[*warning*: *dissection, death*]

Armed retaliation is sometimes necessary to right wrongs—or wrong wrongs, as Tuck and Ree (2013) say. This objectified body filled with landmines, demanding you ruin it to uncover the full narrative, is fighting back.

In its attention to phenomenologies of pain and power, repairing digital play and composition go beyond "playing back" in ways that depart from the colonial, objectifying, interactive stories we tell, where justice and accountability become whitewashed literary conceits that pretend nonviolent, painless solutions are the only answer (Trammell, 2023). Repairing digital composition strips the player of their protections. I compose many digital games where winning means ruining a player-character named Vyshali, or causing her to lose her job, or become institutionalized, or play with her open, gutted abdomen without knowing for certain if she is perimortem in the sense that the dissection killed her, or if she's holding on, and by playing, you're killing her right now.

(-1,-1) Double Hauntings and Threshold

I seek a composition that breaks. Websites with endlessly looping pages. Randomized sequences that suggest *being seized by a ghost*. 404 pages that are whole worlds or

distracting sidequests of their own. Digital interactive scholarship in which the combinatorial possibilities are intellectually interesting and emotionally compelling enough to replay over and over, despite the painful affects they produce.

(3,1) Pleasure, Haunting, and Object

Play has historically excluded and justified violence against people of color, non-Westerners, disabled people, women, and queer, trans, and nonbinary people. Trammell (2023) challenges the canonical white European definition of play that apprehends it as solely pleasurable, arguing that "to repair play, or to 'write back' through the ways we play, we must first endeavor to produce a space where ludic narratives can aspire to tell painful stories alongside the pleasurable" (p. 37).

The canonical white European definition of scholarship apprehends it as cognitively stimulating, but otherwise similarly anodyne. Both play and composition are often experienced as torture—pain without pleasure, work in which we are not reflected and for which we will never be rewarded—by marginalized players.

(10,1) Healing, Haunting, and Security

[**warning**: *suicide by overdose, hanging, cutting*]

[**images**: (1) A dim bedroom, Vyshali's dialogue box displaying in handwriting, "I'm sorry. I tried," (2) then a blurry noose.]

In a visual novel I call digital scholarship that analyzes my diagnosis journey from 2006-2007, a series of branching choices can lead the player as me, the player-character, through racist and ableist microaggressions in the clinic and the academy that can quickly turn fatal, resulting in poverty, medical blacklisting, condemnation to eternal torture, culminating in one of a few "bad endings" in which the player/I die by suicide. An OD, to the sound of spilled pills. A hanging, with a rope snapping taut, creaking, silence, cut to darkness. The soft whisper of a razor parting flesh. A colleague is horrified when I describe this, even though she'd heard about my prior attempts. Why would I want to corner anyone into having to kill me? Except I didn't. Through your actions, in-game and out, you did.

(10,2) Healing, Spite, and Security

[*image*: Inform 7 story, displaying this location and the input >*x (or examine) body*, yielding a cycle of different outputs.]

Ahmed (2017) writes that "stories of complaint are often stories about the exhaustion of a process" (para. 9). She notes that once the process is exhausted, the complainant likely is, too. Play exhausts processes, even when the range of possible actions and outputs isn't exhaustive. Like all the adventure games and role-playing video games where I reiterated my actions and interactions until the game engine began recycling previously displayed text or cheekily told me off.

Emergent narrative is tinted by how profoundly a process is exhausted.

(10,3) Healing, Pleasure, and Security

As exacting as it is to produce work like this, to strategically plot where the loops and layers might splice together, it's the antithesis of self-harm. I have killed myself creating this, and I hated it and loved it. In her work on Asian American unwellness, Khúc (2024) says: "Theorize pain, but make it fun and healing. Academic books are not fun and healing" (p. 3).

Repairing digital scholarship accurately represents chronic pain and intergenerational trauma through literacies of flesh and land, through embodied poetics, color, the cyclical temporality, fragmentation and repetition, mystery; through morality systems, choices, consequences, contagious sensations evoked through description, rhythm, multimodality, time limits, the sense that something is at stake—something has its teeth in your neck and doesn't want to let go—that *is* a kind of fun and healing, that persists after the game is turned off.

(10,5) Healing, Luxury, and Security

Parser-based digital storytelling often requires designers to think in terms of multiple, nested, connected rooms, even when players are presented with only one. Open secrets. Think carefully: What sort of safe house are you in, right now, and whose safety is it really for?

(10,9) Healing, Contingency, and Rigor

Preserved and transmitted almost exclusively by Tamil women through experiential knowledge, kolam-making is ritual, digital—that is, "of the fingers"—play as design ethos. To compose with this design ethos is to celebrate Tamil resilience and resistance and to

enact absent origin stories in digital rhetoric: fractals, computational form, mathematics and prosody, relationality. From a design perspective, Sarin (2022) observes that "a whole alternate universe of compositional possibilities that are not apparent [opens up] when [composers] see a grid not as points, but as a series of constraining straight lines" (p. 36).

That all this happens on the threshold is important. There's a Tamil saying, *right on the vaasal*, the threshold, that signifies a shift in systems of knowledge. I do not present with an argument today, or with the euphoric agony of composing this, but with a handful of rice powder.

(10,10) Healing, Health, and Rigor

The computational navigational performances of digital combinatorial writing, literary and scholarly, transform the scene of communication into a scene of communion between the writer and learner, like the actor-audience communion that manifests *rasa* in classical Indian aesthetics (Banerjee, 2004, p. 300). Knowledge is arrived at through explicit assertions compounded by emergence and synchrony. The navigator's journey is completed not through certainty, perfection, a completed semantic, but by "cognizing the rasa" (p. 308) as your own emergence.

Scholarship finds utility in explanation, but great stories seek the occasion for their recurrence and retelling. "A myth resounds in me when its voice is heard in mine but not as mine" (Carse, 1986, p. 143). This kind of storytelling flourishes in a repairing digital interactive composition, where the composer can try to anticipate but can't plan for all the player's identifications and disidentifications. Like the poetic twist, chance lets us discover the spectacular in the ordinary.

(9,10) Contingency, Healing, and Rigor

[**warning**: *cultural erasure*]

Evil, through the expression of power, terminates infinite play in silence, a media black hole, a war without witness. Victory in such games often requires opponents to die in silence, along with their culture, beliefs, literacy practices, language, without anyone noticing, including the overseers of torture and execution (Carse, 1986, p. 32). They must be suppressed before they infect us all.

Some of us are this *Them*. When we are told there are designated zones for our non-Western pain, no zones for the evocation of violence, only as many accessible zones as the law requires in the university. Linear organization and straightforward argumentation in digital scholarship recreates this *Us* and *Them*, just in a different medium.

(9,9) Double Contingency and Rigor

In systems theory, double contingency means every interaction between two systems is contingent on the actions of both systems, both systems adapting, neither system fully controlling the outcome.

(9,8) Contingency, Design, and Rigor

[*image*: My early notes and outlines of the modular kolams on a 21x21 kolam grids.]

This kolam consists of an arrangement of five primary kolams: four 8x13 rectangles around a 5x5 square. Each 8x13 kolam consists of an 8x8 square and 5x8 rectangle. The 8x8 square contains four 5x3 rectangles around a 2x2 square using a clover-leaf pattern. The five primary kolams converge at symmetrically placed splicing points, permitting the creation of a single loop and preserving four-fold symmetry. Each Cartesian quadrant is themed: (x,y) Composition, (x,-y) Play, (-x,-y) Genocide, (-x,y) Disability. Each modular kolam is thematically noted as the third name in each title.

There are 441 points in total. Each point is a text that has the potential to explode. Each point is polysemic, chameleonic. Your walk-over, and what you deem threatening, will determine much.

(10,8) Healing, Design, and Rigor

Maier et al. (2020) find it generative to map formations of power, identity, and relation onto fractals. I find joy in *doing* the fractal as a geometric notation—in enacting a form that I can see myself in, whether digital text adventure, hypertext, printed transcript, oral address.

Where some people will see a bloody web of alleged threats, others will see a fractal, a kolam, an invitation aiming to feed a thousand souls (Nagarajan, 2019). The edges of this body are raw but open, connective, waiting for another design to flesh out the collective.

(10,7) Healing, Navigation, and Rigor

[*warning*: blood, death, excrement, overdose]

[*images*: (1) Dead-ended into an unwinnable cycle of "Take more medication," (2) you must make me take it, until I end up shitting blood, (3) breathless, dead, against a cream background with a coral menu.]

In the current white European grammar of play and composition, pleasure (rationality, civility) *includes*, while pain (emotion, barbarity) *excludes*. To include pain is to deter the audience.

The game system of *By Mouth, As Needed*, which I designed to make players feel the time, energy, and money South Asian disabled people invest in obtaining and making medicine, randomizes how long you stay on hold with the pharmacy, makes it possible to dead-end yourself with unemployment, poverty, drug interactions, overdose. This game is mathematically organized as well. Kolam grammar and digital interactive composition erects a bridge between mathematics, poetry, and anomalous embodiment, restores voice to the silenced bodymind.

(10,6) Healing, Torture, and Rigor

Rigor: A condition of strictness or stiffness that arises from a constraint that may be academically, socially, or environmentally imposed and actively or passively experienced, such as theoretical rigor, legal rigor, or the rigors of famine. *Rigor mortis*, often abbreviated as *in rigor* or just *rigor*, is the condition of the corporeal body under a particular constraint— death. Perimortem procedures are emergency interventions, typically an emergency C-section, performed around the time of death. Either the patient is already dead or midway the procedure becomes an autopsy.

(9,6) Contingency, Torture, and Rigor

Trammell's (2023) Black phenomenology of play, and also repairing digital scholarship, aim to temper the exclusive focus on neutral or pleasurable cognitive experiences with a taste of pain. This involves expanding our current conceptions of digital scholarship and digital design to include the painful, exhausting, chaotic, infinitely transformable and scalable, relational.

Kolam grammar asks: Where do you make your art when your threshold has been bombed? What does the composition of your body become when the land is a killing field?

(9,2) Contingency, Spite, and Security

The Socialist Patients' Collective argued in the 1970s that chronic illness is the only form of life possible under capitalism (p. 8). *Turn illness into a weapon* is their rallying cry. Still, brandishing pain in digital interactive scholarship, even with content warnings, is treated like nonconsensual sadism.

(9,1) Contingency, Haunting, and Security

Pain is affectively contagious. That's part of its danger. Part of why the game of torture must involve the extreme objectification of its victim, from "Hide the Switch" to disembodied, deracinated academic hyperproductivity (as though these things are possible) (Trammell, 2023; Khúc, 2024). The point is academic abuse is rampant, evident in the work (and minds, bodies, cultures, experiences) that we legitimize, administrative actions, casual exchanges, Q&As. If you feel more like a torturer when torture is called play, I want you to wonder why you read it like an accusation.

(8,1) Design, Haunting, and Security

Digital interactive storytelling as a scholarly mode of thought and delivery—that is pleasurable *and* painful, joyful *and* traumatizing, intellectually stimulating *and* fraught for me to create and for you to experience—creates a resonant space of difficulty that does not fade following completion, whose unpleasant, uncomfortable character lingers long after you've stepped away.

(-1,-6) Haunting, Torture, and Memory

[*warning*: medical gaslighting, rape, suicide bombing]

In the ER in 2014, my body is a fascinating anomaly, the kind clinicians indulge a little poetic license around. An RN in the recovery room says *you're a walking miracle*. My surgeon likens my hardened, fused tissues to *scraping apart layers of wet paper mache*. The woman radiologist who can't read my CAT scan for all the inflammation says *your pelvis looks like a bomb went off*. I think of the raped Tamil suicide bomber, reclaiming a

pelvic area broken by Sinhalese police or soldiers by detonating the bomb she placed inside, her only recourse against the oppressors who showed no mercy when she said *no*.

Though I composed this experience as an interactive text game involving the translation of medical records, I was not brave enough to summon the specter of suicide bombing—a tactic of some armed resistance movements, like the Tamil Tigers—in the academic community. I'm not sure I'm brave enough now.

(-4,-9) Emergence, Contingency, and Chronicity

Kolams are fractal geometry, infinitely complex, repeating patterns that are stable images of dynamic systems. Natural objects exhibit fractal properties. Computer programs can generate fractals, including kolam designs. As fractals that can be scaled and interconnected in many ways, kolams encourage harmonious coexistence in an ecology of beings and composers (Sarin, 2022).

(-2,-7) Spite, Navigation, and Memory

[*image*: Inform 7 story, depicting actions the parser doesn't recognize.]

Parser-based games are prickly. They force me to inhabit my own and my players' desires. They force you to inhabit the designer's logic and machine processes to deduce the actions and directions the game will recognize. Frustration parallels brain fog in every *That's not a verb I recognize* and *You see no such thing* computer response. Discomfort parallels masking chronic pain in academic sociality and composition in typing >*cut body* to advance. But it's that dissonance I'm after—the hard disconnect between your goals as player, the goals of the player-character, and the presumed goals of the object-body torn apart for a whiff of danger. In such digital composition, *feeling how* I write comes first, ensuring pain and pleasure are co-produced (Trammell, 2023).

(-4,-1) Emergence, Spite, and Resistance

[*image*: A circular, palatial room in *King's Quest 6*, where two men duel, and a woman joins the fray, the dialogue box reading: "Cassima thrusts the small dagger into Alhazred's shoulder with all her might."]

The first character to literally draw human blood in a *King's Quest* game is Princess Cassima, the Arabic-coded non-player character damsel-in-distress in *King's Quest 6*. Prior to the game's events, she escapes enslavement and returns home to find her parents have been murdered by their vizier, whose authoritarian regime has been unstoppable by the locals. She's imprisoned in a tower for most of the game, but, provided you sneak her the dagger she requests before the final showdown, she stabs her oppressor in the shoulder.

King's Quest is a didactic series where killing is never justified. The white player-character Prince Alexander bloodlessly concusses the vizier is the game-winning (thus superior) victory. And yet, the game is unwinnable if you fail to arm Cassima in advance. Her attack is an ambient rhetorical action, a nondiegetic machine *if* carrying dagger *then* stab act that puts the pragmatic desire and capacity for violence in BIPOC NPC hands.

(-3,4) Pleasure, Emergence, and Anomaly

Rasa, Sanskrit for flavor or essence, is an abiding affective state that arises in the communion between a text and the audience immersed in and experiencing it (Banerjee, 2004). Rasa theory serves as a cultural hermeneutics for Eelam Tamil digital composition. Anticipating actions the player might attempt and establishing the relationship between those actions and associated information outputs creates an evocative, relational, co-authored experience, doing justice to homeland, cultural preservation, a genocide.

(-4,6) Emergence, Torture, and Anomaly

A model in its mathematical principles and an anti-model in its relational, fragile, puzzling emergence, kolam as a formal constraint provides the security of systematization without sacrificing ambiguity or mystery. The pleasure and pain of using a Tamil cultural form as narrative armature, festival celebration, daily salutation, the smell of blood oxidizing. *Emergence* is not far from *emergency*, after all.

(0,9) Origins, Contingency, and Contagion

The relationship between torture and play is not unfamiliar to me, and I'm not alone in arguing that authentically describing and analyzing chronic pain demands the use of embodied rhetoric and relationality, but even writers who engage in a poetics of pain hesitate to bring the machete down. Scarry's (1985) contention that pain is subjective, interior, and arhetorical is frequently taken up in chronic pain scholarship in medical

rhetoric and disability studies, but almost always in ways that avoid engaging with the fact that the context of her research is war and torture.

No one wants to go there, but it's where some of us live. Someone is always doing backflips to avoid visiting me there. "Digitized" files let me bring my life with me while continuing to pass as a settler-adjacent model minority.

(-7,9) Navigation, Contingency, and Relationality

Until now, I've used Aarseth's (1997) *cybertext* to describe my work: a "game-world-labyrinth [...] an imaginary world, in which the reader can explore at will, get lost, discover secret paths, play around, follow the rules, and so on" (p. 4). Print and digital, cybertexts demand nontrivial engagement that destabilizes the narrative and creates the conditions for emergence and relationality—the registers of chronic pain and fatigue, Eelam Tamil personhood and trauma.

Computational, embodied, relational, and Tamil, *kolam grammar*—like Haas' (2007) wampum as hypertext and Arola's (2018) land-based digital design—makes an absent story present in our discussions of digital interactive composition and play.

(-7,6) Navigation, Torture, and Relationality

Torture is involuntary, and play need not invoke consent. As Trammell (2023) asserts, both play and torture construct relationships between subject and object, in which the (white, colonizing) "player"-subject plays and the (BIPOC, colonized) "played"-object suffers. Something happens when you compose digital, combinatorial, interactive scholarship for the completionist instead of the speed-runner. I can aggregate potential player actions from my own experience instead of depleting myself trying to reach for something beyond the fog. The onus is on you. The affective composer-navigator scene of communion changes depending on how many processes are exhausted, and if the player finds narrative exhilaration through their exhaustion. You may not understand how the rules of universities, academic publishing, and academic sociality involve traumatic, exhausting procedures that stifle complaints for cold storage. The environment of playful digital scholarship, too, is convivial until you don't know where to turn.

(-9,8) Contingency, Design, and Relationality

Digital interactive scholarship might perfectly align with my decolonial praxis—with methods that are periodically fetishized but privately criticized as lacking rigor—but I might

as well be peddling bombs. It's bad enough to claim that digital interactive forms enable me to write *about* chronic pain and fatigue *with* chronic pain and fatigue *without* exacerbating either. It's worse to advocate for digital design in which player input and machine processes rhetorically produces painful affects.

Even with an extensive rationale, I've made people recoil when I say I want to do this. But pain is an exquisite vista, as repairing digital composition grasps.

(-7,7) Split Navigation and Relationality

[*image*: The Fibonacci notation of a scholarly sentence.]

Blood is a river carrying the ineffable whispers of our ancestors, a substrate for spirit possession, the seat of my writerly instinct. Though I didn't always have a name for it, my attention to prosody was always mathematical, sometimes expressing the Fibonacci sequence through sentence syllables in scholarship and fiction—easy to diagram once you perceive where the lines break—my instinctive rhythm across genres culturally specific, computational, and emergent—like this very sentence. Its encoded Fibonacci rhythm evokes an embodied rhythm in readers and contributes to the structural resilience of the composition, which in turn contributes to the aesthetic, theoretical power of its experiential context.

(-5,5) Double Luxury and Anomaly

When you have learned to live with trauma, communal grief, and lack of closure, the Eurocentric prerogatives of academic style—straightforward argumentation, ritualized agonism, linear progression, compartmentalization, coherence—don't make sense. I have always pre-composed like this, always felt that digital design encodes multitudes and gives oblique answers. Form and constraint as a freeing practice constitute a palimpsestic expression of anomalous embodiment, intergenerational trauma, and environmental resources that doesn't bring me closer to self-responsibilized suicide.

(-5,3) Luxury, Pleasure, and Anomaly

Everything I have written contains at least one Easter Egg.

(-9,5) Contingency, Pleasure, and Relationality

Digital interactive media, and the print-based combinatorial literature that preceded it, demand the patterns of thought that academic scholarship rejects. What reader actions must I anticipate? What (puzzle, conversation, action) dependencies must I account for? For the Eelam Tamil diasporic-disabled composer, this is a pleasurable act of puzzle-solving—a kind of Tamil literacy—that distracts from corporeal and spiritual pain in the communicative ecology (Canagarajah, 2024).

(-8,4) Design, Emergence, and Relationality

Formally, this is a writing that subtly encodes Eelam Tamil pain and personhood, the "stuckness" of chronic pain and brain fog, the fragmentation of the life unlived without trauma. But it can masquerade as a Euro-Western literary genre, like theoretical fiction or Oulipo, eccentric but able-bodyminded. This is its geometric concordance: not line, not arc, not circle, not diamond, not a shape easily apprehended in the European tradition.

(-7,4) Navigation, Emergence, and Relationality

Banerjee (2004) describes the navigational experience of "hopscotching" from node to node in a hypertext or cybertext, which disposes the navigator towards *experiencing* (instead of intellectualizing or critiquing) and the pleasurable cognition of *rasa* (essence). Nonlinear, associative chains of discovery stage rasa for the navigator and the composer through emergence. The result: a digital composition that offers coordinates without a readymade map or legend, without an organizing query, that asks you to *feel how* the composer knows before cognizing *what* she knows (p. 300).

(-6,4) Torture, Emergence, and Relationality

[*image*: The lower left corner of the index map automatically generated by Inform 7.]

Writing is torture. The design ethos of torture is the art of reverse engineering. You begin with what causes the total annihilation of the body and work your way backwards until death no longer looms. You select methods that are as polite as possible: suspension torture over beating, noise torture over necklacing.

Intense pain unmakes the world. When intense pain destroys your world in all its dimensions—cognitive, emotional, spiritual, cultural—it's impossible to care about the

content of the answer. In a flare-up, during periods of collective remembrance, I'll say anything to get from one moment or word to the next, like the tortured victim of the state. But "the form of the answer, the fact of [the tortured prisoner's] answering, is always crucial" (Scarry, 1985, p. 29).

I scrawled this note in May: *why q facile unpleasant decolonial indecipherability*. The content isn't as important as the form, prophesying the mathematical structure of this composition, load-bearing though it may be.

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