

## Don't Look Into The Abyss Statement

### Concept & Narrative Structure

*Don't Look Into The Abyss* is a 72-page, single-player choose-your-path book; a gamified narrative that has different outcomes dependent on the reader's choices. The allure of Choose-your-path books is the opportunity to play out multiple adventures. To both play it safe and take chances. That concept was the ideal foundation for my thesis work.

I designed *Don't Look Into The Abyss* to be a proxy for social "norms" and restrictions. Playing the game consists of navigating a series of binary choices predicated on one concept of success. At the same time, *Don't Look Into The Abyss* includes a continuous narration that gives subtle judgments and emphasizes specific options over others, all disguised as the objective presentation of choices. *Don't Look Into The Abyss* also has a number of hidden passages—passages that no choices lead to—that offer new context and even an alternate ending, but the reader must deliberately disregard the rules and break away from prescribed paths to reach them. This structure was conceived in response to my experience of queerness and specifically gender nonconformity. The book's rigid system of binary choices and the in-narrative implication that navigating them should be innate are in service of this metaphor.

I often make work inspired by the interplay between internal development of queer identity and external influences. Constructs like gender or beauty are ideas perpetuated by people: they are not immutable facts of the world, no matter how ubiquitous they feel. However, understanding their nature does not mean these social norms don't impact the way we navigate the world or the way we are perceived. Just as the game narrator is subjective, so are the rules we govern ourselves by every day. Within those restrictions, queerness is an ongoing journey propelled by a cycle of reflection, and often involves transforming familiar scenarios by making new, speculative choices. That is the experience I aimed to capture in *Don't Look Into The Abyss*. I hope that the book will offer connection and catharsis for those who identify with the experiences of its protagonist. For those who may not, I hope *Don't Look Into The Abyss* offers a foray into isolation and perhaps a greater understanding.

### Process & Material

I chose to print *Don't Look Into The Abyss* on the Hiedelberg KORS offset lithography press in the Borowsky Center firstly so I could create a large edition. The book's content requires interaction to be activated, so I wanted to be able to distribute it in the community for an accessible price. My second reason to choose offset was so I could utilize the transparent inks. For the inks, I chose a split complementary color scheme, meaning the two main colors pop next to each other but mute one another when overlaid. While the potential for bright colors is present throughout, in most areas it is disguised by heavy layering. The unfiltered colors are only seen when The Abyss is present.

The Abyss in the context of the narrative walks the line between a malevolent entity and an environmental hazard. It's unpredictable and unnerving. Conceptually it represents an internal dissonance. Using bright, exciting colors for The Abyss was a choice intended to draw the eye and contradict the narrative's assertion that The Abyss is in all ways negative. In addition to the colors, I also used moire patterns to depict The Abyss. I drew a direct connection between moiré patterns and queerness: moiré is a naturally occurring phenomena, considered undesirable in many printmaking contexts, and difficult to look at while at the same time visually exciting. Most importantly, moiré effects are created by internal conflict between layered versions of the same image. In my thesis work, I created moire patterns by drawing The Abyss with concentric circles, and then digitally manipulating the three color layers so those sections would be deliberately misregistered.

There are several other important visual elements of the project I'd like to address. For example, the strong throughline of map imagery, evident in the mural wall of my gallery installation. Map imagery was an original inspiration for this project. When I began developing my thesis, I was creating work exploring the connection between topographic maps and the physical body. Originally, I did this as a way

of talking about the body divorced from gendered expectations and assumptions, and whether it could be freeing to treat it only as a form. But the more I considered maps and their purpose, the more I also linked map imagery to the choice map of a choose-your-path book. With the parallel to the choose-your-path structure, my use of maps as a tool to reckon with the queer body, the conceptual connection between understanding and legitimizing something by recording it, and the in-narrative themes of navigation, maps became the visual foundation for this book.

I'd also like to talk about my decision to make this book a comic. Comics are central to my practice: they are a medium I'm confident in communicating with. I specifically chose to use them here because I wanted a rich visual symbolism for *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, and because they give me a structure I can play within or subvert. For instance, comics offer the use of closure. Closure in comics is the conceptual space between illustrations or panels, where the reader internally completes the action. In *Don't Look Into The Abyss*, closure can also happen between detached scenes when the reader visualizes the transition from A to B. That link created by the reader is an essential part of the experience. For example, there is an ending where the protagonist's helmet cracks. The narration implies that this leads to failure/death, but if the reader has picked up additional context from the hidden scenes, they may form different closure/understanding of the outcome. That's the magic of combining a comic and a choose-your-path book.

### **Deluxe Edition**

For the deluxe edition, my goal was to create a heightened immersive environment for the book to be experienced within. It is an enclosure for the book, but can be set up as a trifold screen. The circles on each side of the screen mirror the windows seen throughout the book, putting the reader in the pilot's chair.