

Cursebending: a playful interaction of misbehaving objects

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INTRODUCTION

The field of queer indie games include many different expressions of queer lived experience, including diverse representation of identities and stories, but also looking beyond representation to other formal elements of game design and how games are played (Ruberg & Shaw 2017; Chang 2017). What sets games apart from other forms of media, is that meaning can be conveyed via processes that can be manipulated. A unique form of expression is possible via the game's procedurality (Bogost 2007; Flanagan 2009). At the same time, the role of play and the player cannot be underemphasised. A player brings their own personal and creative self to the game. Players appropriate the game for the purpose of play and create their own meaning beyond procedurally embedded designs (Sicart 2011). Queer theory and play theory share an overlap in this sense: to appropriate and manipulate systems, rules and procedures to creatively imagine new possibilities. This paper seeks to explore the intersections of queer theory and play theory to reimagine procedurality. Relating queer theories to theories of play, how can such "queer play" strategies inform a game's design?

The paper traces the development of an experimental game *Dance Dance Deception* (Fourie 2024), which was developed as practice-based research to investigate related lines of inquiry mentioned above.

Dance Dance Deception (*DDD* from here onwards) is a goofy dance simulator that features intentionally janky controls¹ and odd procedural animation. The game progressively exposes its own procedural nature as objects and behaviours for a player to manipulate. Edmond Chang (2017) coined the term "queergaming", which includes values like non-competitive play, embracing goofiness and inefficiency, exploring different rules and goals, and even the "radical potential of failure". The game's narrative expresses conventional competitive goals like improving skills and winning the dance competition, while progressively confronting the player with unexpected behaviour of elements like janky controls and glitched animation. The narrative explains to the player that the game is cursed and needs to be fixed to win the competition. The game's procedural meaning involves detecting and fixing misbehaving elements to create a skillful dance and achieve the competitive goal. However, the possibility exists for a player to defy such goals, to embrace the weird, to spectacularly fail the competition. In this sense, procedural meaning is open, and agency given to the player.

On a meta-level, *DDD* reflects the creative process of game design, where desired outcomes are thwarted by the unexpected behavior of computational processes. The struggle of finding and fixing bugs is familiar to any game designer. However, some designers (McClure 2020; Moore 2016) have proposed a design approach as

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collaboration with digital tools, meaning that such a procedural engagement requires an openness to accept digital things for what they are and how they behave, responding to unexpected behaviour and artefacts as suggestions that could change the preconceived intentions of the designer. *DDD*'s outcome thus resulted from embracing such encounters during the process, turning bugs into main thematic and aesthetic features as well as mechanics for a player to manipulate.

This paper contends that procedurality itself can be queered, during the process of design of games, which extends into the meaning a player makes when engaging with the resulting outcomes. A queer playful ethos presented through the design can potentially prompt players to consider similarly queer playful modes of engagement with procedurality.

By testing these ideas through practice-based design, *Dance Dance Deception* offers insights into queer game studies and presents new design strategies. It demonstrates how queering procedurality can encourage players to break rules, celebrate failure, and approach play with a sense creative potential. These strategies can benefit other queer and indie game designers, suggesting new ways to engage with both procedural systems and players' creative agency.

BIO

Lou Fourie is a Melbourne based artist and game maker, currently studying Animation Games and Interactive Media at RMIT. Their focus is 3D art and animation for games. Their passion is exploring intersections of culture and current digital technologies specific to games and interactive media. They have previously exhibited and presented at Freeplay Angles 2024.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Shmalzer (2003) describes janky controls as disruptions to the expected cybernetic flow between a player and the game system through controller input. Shmalzer argues that jank presents opportunities for experimental gameplay.

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