

SUPER SIANNE NGAI STYLE: Applying Ngai's aesthetic categories to a study of Supergiant Games' body of work between 2011-2021

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INTRODUCTION

In this presentation I discuss the way I use Sianne Ngai's aesthetic methodology from *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012) as an important theoretical tool in my PhD study, *SUPER GIANT STYLE*. *SUPER GIANT STYLE* examines the way San Francisco-based independent studio Supergiant Games developed their artistic style over ten years of game development and four published games: *Bastion*, *Transistor*, *Pyre*, and *Hades*. The thesis takes a particular interest in the way Supergiant's work explores different representations of home and includes interviews with the development team in the USA. While aspects of Ngai's aesthetic philosophy have appeared in some game studies scholarship to date, my thesis is the first to consider how the specific method of Ngai's aesthetic thought in *Our Aesthetic Categories* can operate in the context of a study of a game design studio.

Ngai is an eminent American scholar of aesthetics. While Ngai's work does not speak to video games directly, the categories of cute, interesting, and zany that she takes as her primary point of study in *Our Aesthetic Categories* examine some of the most important social dynamics underlying life in the Capitalocene; production, circulation and consumption. Ngai uses the term aesthetic category to refer to a specific kind of 'double-sided' aesthetic experience. The first side involves style, while the other is action; 'what we learn to say in response to objects we perceive' (Ngai 2020). In my research I suggest this makes Ngai's conceptualisation of aesthetic categories robust and useful in an artistic study of video games; a medium that, perhaps more than any other before it, is defined by an experience of style—a game's visual, artful, narrative, and genre qualities—and a player's structured behaviour towards the video game through play.

Across my analyses of Supergiant Games' body of work, I propose that Supergiant's style is one that provocatively plays with the aesthetic categories of the Capitalocene through the medium of game design. Like Ngai's work, each of Supergiant Games acknowledge the styles and dialectic tensions of existing in an era not entirely defined by capitalism and, by extension, settler colonialism, but which inescapably influences human experience and reflection in the everyday. In this presentation I present examples of my analysis of Supergiant Games', including a discussion of the

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recursive blob-like figure of the Pyth plushie in *Bastion*, the eternal administrative workers and precarious chefs of *Hades*, and the arrival of Red's 'Sea Monster' pizza in *Transistor*; a sublime apparition of capitalism's immediacy, even in the midst of civic collapse. In *SUPER GIANT STYLE* I consider how Ngai's work can help illuminate some of the contributions, influences, and relations of Supergiant Games' work in a broader canon of contemporary game design.

BIO

Heather Blakey is a current PhD candidate at the University of Western Australia. Her work examines intersections between technology, intimacy, and the environment in video games, literature, and virtual worlds. Heather is presently completing her doctoral thesis in literary studies, which comprises the first fulsome academic study of the work of the award-winning San Francisco-based game design studio Supergiant Games. Heather has published academic articles and chapters on intimacy and aesthetics in video games and is commissioned for arts and literature coverage for various publications. In 2023 Heather was awarded the UWA Convocation Matilda Award for Cultural Excellence in Literature.

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