

Bird-RPG (Sunshine Coast Edition): Situated Experimental Game

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Keywords

Situated Play, Community Games, Games as Rituals, Anti-Scale, Discord.

Format of work

A Web game and Discord server with accompanying supplemental material.

DESCRIPTION OF WORK

Bird-RPG offers a practice-based critique of universalist game design, an approach driven by the capitalist goal of maximising sales through context-free, universally accessible artifacts. Instead, the game explores the meaning generated through small, community-situated play experiences.

As a situated game, most of its interactivity lives within the Discord server for the Melbourne Academic Games, Play and Interactive Entertainment initiative (MAGPIE).

Bird-RPG invites players to embody birds, build nests, and engage in collective rituals. Core “gift” mechanics include: players “*singing*” to grant actions to others, “*brooding*” to help hatch their friends' eggs, and “*foraging*” to decorate shared spaces. A special “*research*” mechanic, which requires players to identify quotes from academic work written by community members, further situates the game in its specific context.

The game is experienced through the players’ own personal devices.

If accepted, a special in-game event will be created for DiGRA Australia 2026, featuring insights into other works at the Conference, and showcasing the Sunshine Coast's local ecology.

The web part of Bird-RPG can be visited publicly at: <https://bird-rpg.onrender.com/>

RESEARCH STATEMENT

Background: The commercial games industry often pursues universally accessible, context-free artifacts, an approach that mirrors what Donna Haraway (1988) calls the “god trick”: a disembodied, objective “view from nowhere.” Bird-RPG is a playable rejection of this paradigm, arguing that a game's value can be inextricably linked to its specific social and technical container. This aligns with theories of “situated play,” which posit that intelligent action is shaped by the specific social and material contexts in which it occurs (Lave & Wenger 1991; Susi & Rambusch 2007)

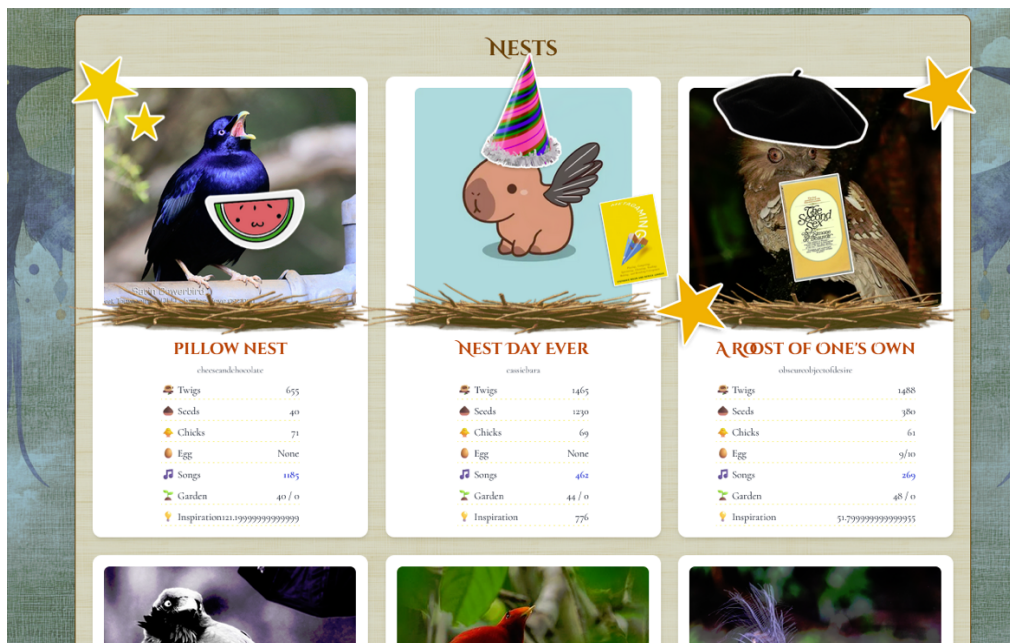
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This work is situated within the discourse around personal and alternative game-making. Anna Anthropy (2012) argues for the power of small, personal tools, while the panelists in Leigh Alexander's "Four Perspectives on Personal Games" discuss how games can act as "empathy simulators" where "context is everything" (Alexander 2013).

This project is most directly in conversation with Robert Yang's concept of "games as crafts/gifts" (Yang 2013). Yang imagines a future for developers outside the commercial market, one where rather than commodified products, games are made as intrinsically valuable gifts for a small, known audience.

Bird RPG explores game design success as the social connection generated through communal rituals rather than individual wins, and questions the traditionally-traced edges of games as-artifacts.



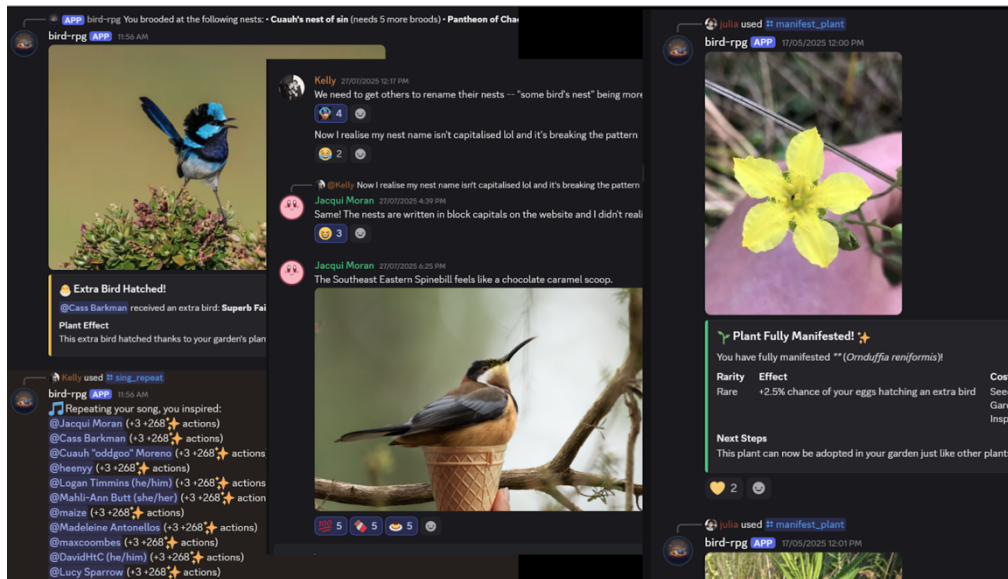
Contribution to field/industry: Cuauhtemoc Moreno is the lead facilitator of Bird-RPG. As a community-situated game, and again to reject the “god-trick”, I am mindful of not using a phrasing that would evoke a feeling of “the sole game designer”.

For practitioners and researchers, this project serves as a case study in "anti-scale" design. It provides a case study for community-based organisations, friend groups, or educational cohorts to create playful systems that strengthen their own social fabric.

The project's process itself represents Game Design as Commensality. As explored by Edwards et al. (2025), commensality is a concept adapted from the social bonding of eating together to describe a form of co-creation in tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), where the game is viewed as a "meal" and the players as a "family unit." In this context, the lines between designer and player are blurred in a social, participatory process.

The game itself functions as a Performative Auto-Ethnography, drawing on Judith Butler's (1988) concept of performativity. This consists of a system where repeated social acts by players construct the community's identity over time.

The public log of actions in the Discord channel and the communal “codex” creates a living, evolving archive of the MAGPIE community's interactions and culture, mediated by the game’s mechanics.



Significance: Within an Australian context, the project engages directly with local communities (intersectional Australian game academics) and local ecologies (bird-watching events sprouting as side-events from the game). Bird-RPG suggests a case of “games as craft” that celebrates our specific places and communities. This success can be partly attributed to the choice of Discord as the main interaction platform, placing the game within the community’s already-inhabited digital home.

Further study of Bird-RPG’s one-year history will look at its emergent social dynamics, such as players adopting archetypes (the generous songbird, the min/maxer, the decorator) based on their expressions of creativity and generosity. Ultimately, we want to continue exploring how intentionally small, context-dependent games can create spaces for vulnerability, collective creativity, and affective connection.

Overall, the project's significance lies in its argument for the small, the local, and the ephemeral against the industry's preoccupation with scalability. It proposes that a game's success can be measured by the quality, rather than the quantity, of connections it fosters.

EXHIBITION

The work will be presented as a live, interactive installation.

- **Primary Interaction:** Attendees will be invited to join the game through a special channel within the DiGRA Australia or MAGPIE Discord servers via a QR code on their personal devices. They will be given a role that grants access to the Bird-RPG channels, where they can play alongside conference hosts and the existing community.
- **Display:** A single computer/monitor at the exhibition space will display a live feed of the #🐦-bird-rpg-actions channel, showcasing the game's activity in real-time.

- **Supplementary Material:** Informational Hand-outs, a poster, and a bird-watching bingo card for the Sunshine Coast are planned to complement the installation.
- **Sunshine Coast Event:** A special in-game event will be created for the conference, featuring interactions with other presentations and themed around the Sunshine Coast's local ecology. Extra-situated
- **Requirements:** Reliable Wi-Fi/Internet access. Monitor optional, can use own laptop.

BIO

Cuauhtemoc Moreno is a Creative Developer and Game Designer with 15+ years of experience in a wide range of digital award-winning projects. From popular web browser games to physical installations involving full-body motion; from virtual reality experiences to playful educational eBooks.

Currently based in Sydney, Australia, he has served as the CTO of Sound Scouts since 2015, thriving at the proverbial intersection of art, technology, and social impact. He is also a founding member of Serenade, a collective dedicated to curating and organising artistic and experimental game events at the fringes and niches of the field.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not exist without the amazing community at **MAGPIE**. Special thanks to the souls who brought the ecosystem to life, including Mahli-Ann, Cass, Madeleine, Kelly, Jacqui, and Maize, who shaped the game into the communal celebration it is today.

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