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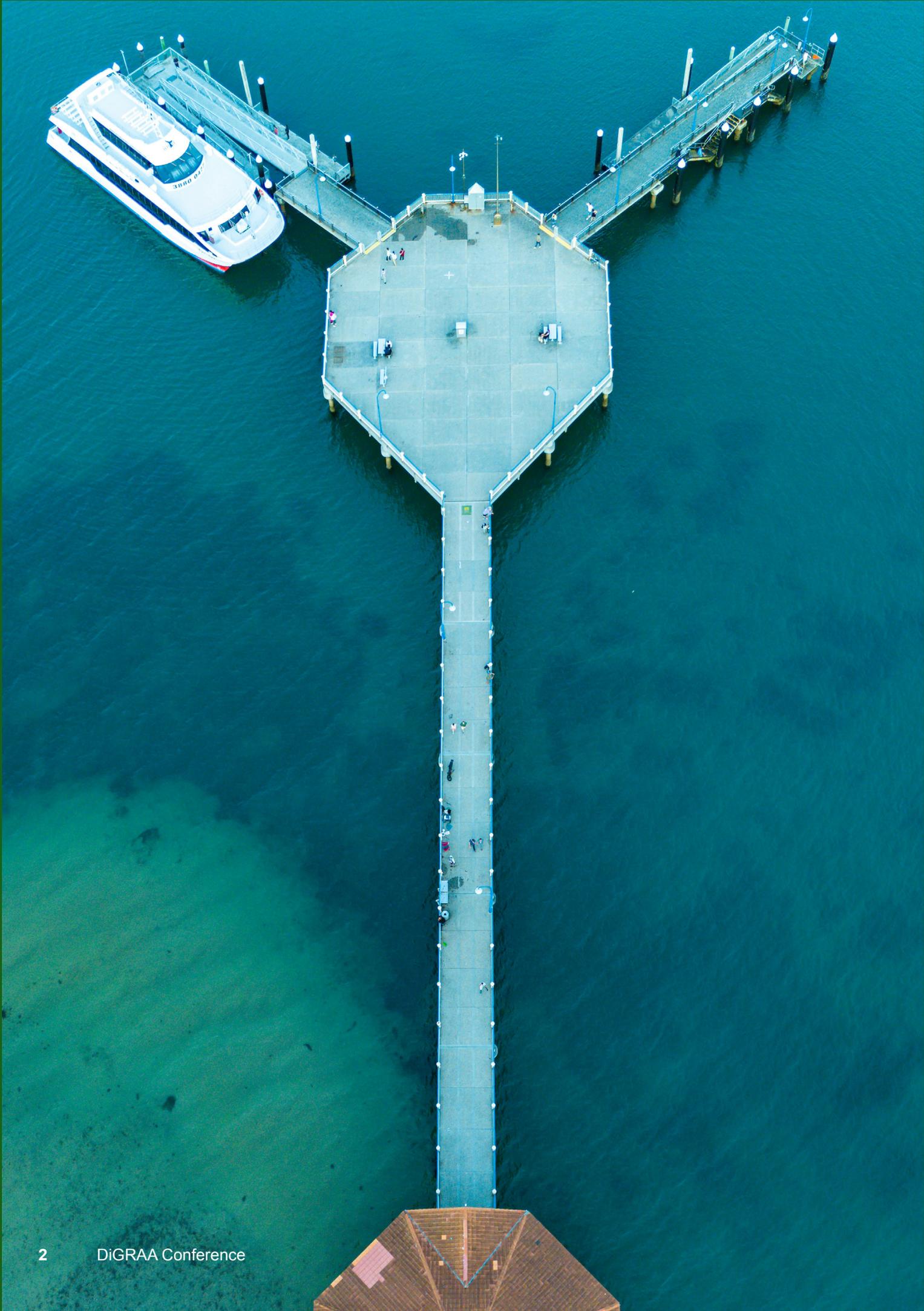


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Our Supporters



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Welcome From The Conference Chair and Introduction to the Extended Abstracts

I am thrilled to be writing the foreword to the Digital Games Research Association of Australia (DiGRAA) 2026 conference proceedings for the extended abstract track papers just as I was thrilled to welcome delegates to the very first regional DiGRAA hosted by the University of the Sunshine Coast (UniSC) at the Moreton Bay Campus: the newest university campus in Queensland.

A regional DiGRAA is very timely. Creative, trained people are essential for a regional area to develop creative capital (Comunian et al., 2015) and innovate and be economically successful (Mecocci et al., 2022). And given the Sunshine Coast and Moreton Bay are both known for their creative culture and industries ranging from fashion to theatre, creative writing and more, UniSC and the Moreton Bay campus are an appropriate home for the annual DiGRAA conference in 2026. Accordingly, we invited submissions to broadly reflect on the creative theme. Creativity is essential to the development and analysis of video games and indeed all academic research.

Within Queensland, and more specifically South-East Queensland, UniSC's home, the video game industry is growing. In just a few short years, Queensland went from being home to 17% of studios and 10% of employees in 2021 (IGEA, 2021) to 20% and 25% respectively in 2023 (IGEA, 2023) and 25% and 27% in 2024 (IGEA, 2024). This is mostly due to the support available in the state from Screen Queensland. They have been hard at work providing programs for developers, grants, the Games Residence, the 12-month artist-in-residence program providing co-working space, industry expert access, business mentoring, and other activities such as the Season of the Dev on the Sunshine Coast aimed at further growing game development in the area. Screen Queensland also supports the Brisbane-based Queensland Games Festival, which takes place every June and is growing every year.

This level of support is essential for the Australian video game industry to grow which is, by its nature, precarious and made up of small studios (Keogh, 2021). However, these studios also have the potential to be creative, cultural and financial tour de forces. Queensland is home to Witch Beam, the producer of the BAFTA award-winning game *Unpacking* (2021), while House House's *Untitled Goose Game* (2019) is arguably the most iconic video game created by an Australia studio in recent years given its horrible goose main character (honk!).

It is within this context that DiGRAA 2026 takes place with 114 delegates and attendees in person from all of Australia's states and territories as well as New Zealand and other countries around the world. We also have more than 50 further delegates joining the conference online. DiGRAA 2026 is also thrilled to have three amazing and insightful keynotes: Professor Anjum Naweed, Professor Kristy de Salas and Mr Dylan Bennett. Professor Naweed will speak about how video games designed for entertainment can still feature detailed and well-researched mental health and wellbeing information, Professor de Salas will explore the regional video game industry of Hobart and Tasmania and the creation of a video game major in that context, while Mr Bennett will talk about how he built a video game industry and community from scratch in Darwin in the Northern Territory and how that industry is now partnering with universities in research projects.

The growth of the Northern Territory video game industry, like Queensland's, has been on a positive trajectory and is a case study for the rest of Australia, and indeed all marginal industries. The Territory accounted for 0% of the Australian video game industry in terms of studios or employees in 2021 (IGEA, 2021) and surged to 2% and 1% respectively in 2023 (IGEA, 2023). And if that was not enough, it has produced *Diets and Deities* (Larrikin Interactive, 2024), which won Excellence in Music at the



Welcome From The Conference Chair and Introduction to the Extended Abstracts

2024 Australian Game Developer Awards (IGEA, 2024), and was nominated for Game of the Year, while the upcoming Pasture: Livestock Simulator (Salty Games) received a \$1.5 million investment from Paspalis Co-Investment Fund (Northern Territory Government, 2024). The Northern Territory is an example of the success that passion and regional grit can produce, and Mr Bennett is thus a very fitting keynote for the first regional DiGRAA. The extended abstract track features sessions on many aspects of video games from video game streamers, ecology, gender and video games to the art and character design of games. Our two extended abstract track best papers highlight this breadth of ideas, and indeed the breadth of video games themselves. Kelly Li, a PhD student from the University of Sydney, explored how and why players seek out bad endings in otome, a Japanese genre focusing on romance video games. Research has found that a happy ending is considered an essential aspect of romance stories, indeed if a romance story does not provide one, it can be seen as inauthentic (Burgess & Kolodziej, 2025). However, Ms Li explored how players actually seek out bad endings, in addition to good or happy ones, and they derive new, unique erotic benefits from them (Li, 2026). Ms Li has thus produced insights relevant to the study of the romance genre, not just in video games, but also more broadly.

Dr Hugh Davies, from RMIT and the President of Chinese DiGRAA, was the other best paper winner. His extended abstract explores how the Chinese government's state-sponsor of the video game industry has produced success but also a formulaic industry where smaller developers struggle (Davies, 2026). China's video game industry is becoming more visible to the West thanks to AAA, blockbuster style video games like Black Myth Wukong that are designed to appeal to a Western audience (Burgess, 2024). Interestingly, smaller

studios struggling in an otherwise wealthy and powerful industry is a feature observable in the Japanese video game industry (Burgess & Schules, 2026). Marginal industries and developers should be studied to produce insights that are relevant locally, as well as globally (Kerr, 2017; Sotamaa, 2021), making Dr Davies paper an important read.

On the behalf of DiGRAA 2026's Local Organising Committee, I would like to conclude by sincerely thanking the University of the Sunshine Coast for their support and for the internal Accelerate grant, UniSuper and the Engage Research Lab for their sponsorship and Triballink for providing a wonderful Welcome to Country.

Without further ado, I am delighted to present the 40 extended abstract track papers from DiGRAA 2026.



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Extended Abstract Papers

Pleasurable Punishments: Examining Masochistic Play and “Bad” Endings in Otome Games

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Keywords

otome games, the hegemony of play, romance in games, gender in games, feminism in games

INTRODUCTION

While male fantasies of domination pervade the Hegemony of Play (Fron et al. 2007), otome games emerge as a unique game genre by positioning othered female players as desiring subjects. This female-oriented genre is animated by ideological fantasies, where the romantic happy ending acts as the primary gameplay goal (Kim 2009; Andlauer 2018). In traditional romance media, happy endings typically frame gendered power asymmetries as desirable for female audiences (Radway 1991). The normative purpose of happy endings extends to otome games (Richards 2015) by privileging spiritual views of love marked by chastity; naturalising existing heteropatriarchal relationship arrangements; and idealising heteronormative romantic myths of eternal togetherness. Yet no extensive research has been conducted on their opposite – the *bad* ending – despite their rich potential to subvert the utopian premise of happy endings in otome games. Scholarship thus far has only briefly mentioned the bad ending, where this mechanic is framed as a gameplay punishment occurring when the implied female player-subject incorrectly performs ideal heterofemininity (Richards 2015), resulting in a failure to fulfill the romance through melodramatic narrative circumstances (Ganzon 2018). There is an increasing trend of players who deliberately seek bad endings precisely because they are more likely to feature explicitly sexual, violent and sadomasochistic fantasies which ordinarily contradict the utopian project of romance. However, scant scholarly attention has been paid to the potential, anti-normative pleasures of these gameplay punishments.



Figure 1: An illustration featuring the hero locking the heroine in a cage in one of the bad endings of *Amnesia: Memories* (Otomate 2022)

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In this paper, I address this gap by examining the function of bad endings in otome games, and whether they operate as deeply gendered forms of *masochistic play* and *transgressive representation* within games. While extensive research in game studies has been conducted on the masochistic pleasures of failure in games (Juul 2013) and its queer potentiality (Ruberg 2015), broader feminist scholarship understandably treats masochism with ambivalence due to essentialising myths of male/sadism and female/masochism in patriarchal culture (Bartky 1990). Drawing on theoretical insights from both fields, this paper presents early findings from a doctoral project. I employ digital feminist textual analysis to perform a negotiated reading (Hall, 1990) of bad endings in four otome games. These texts were all developed by the otome game market leader Otomate and were chosen because they expressly position bad endings as erotic sadomasochistic fantasies: *Birushana* (Otomate 2022), *Piofiore* (Otomate 2020), *Amnesia: Memories* (Otomate 2022) and *Olympia Soirée* (Otomate 2021).

This paper finds that while bad endings are hegemonically positioned as “failures” in otome games, they form important counterparts to happy endings by inviting new and explicitly erotic forms of masochistic play. These endings allow female players to engage in alternate constructions of femininity in games by forefronting anti-normative fantasies. These bad endings are also afforded by the ludic format of dating simulations, as these games can facilitate multiple storyline pathways and endings (Azuma 2009) compared to traditional romances. While otome games are traditionally invested in spiritual conceptions of romance (Kim 2009), this paper finds that this genre often leverages bad endings to include erotic content, including anti-normative fantasies verging on the extreme. This complicates existing research which positions these endings as “bad”, where I argue for the generative *and* stultifying potential of feminine masochism in otome games. I demonstrate that the masochistic pleasures of otome games ultimately cannot be considered truly transgressive nor entirely regressive: despite their extreme content, these bad endings still work within patriarchal scripts that overwhelmingly eroticise gendered submission and domination. Yet these bad endings do not always conform straightforwardly to gender norms, since players are able to reparatively leverage these endings for their own erotic purposes. While masochistic pleasures in otome games may not be politically *transformative*, they are nonetheless politically *important* and anti-hegemonic in how they address politically unsanctioned desires of female players.

Rather than framing the pursuit of the happy ending as the only significant gameplay goal, it is important for scholars to examine the diverse ludic pleasures otome games proffer. Bad endings in otome games invite anti-normative and masochistic forms of play where pleasure intertwines with punishment, hence serving as important conduits of erotic fantasy for female players. This paper hopes to offer several contributions to game studies. First, it adds to literature on sexuality in otome games (Cosmos 2018) and broader gaming culture, which remain limited due to stigma (Harviainen et al. 2018). Second, it contributes to modes of textual analysis in game studies – especially those focused on failure in games – by exploring how gameplay reward systems crucially differentiate ludic romances from traditional romance media. Third, it heightens our understanding of the diverse pleasures and fantasies that female-oriented game genres construct and fulfill for their othered gaming publics.

BIO

Kelly Li is a PhD Candidate and feminist games scholar based in the Sydney Games and Play Lab at the University of Sydney. Her doctoral project works towards an understanding of ludic pleasure in otome games and their gaming counterpublics, exploring how representations of gender, sexuality and transgression form a unique

politics of desire within this female-oriented genre. She has presented her work at conferences such as *DiGRA Australia*, *Replaying Japan* and *Queer and Feminist Perspectives on Japanese Popular Cultures*. Her previous work examined the ideology of romance within otome games.

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Capital Games: Creativity, Commerce, and Control in China's Videogame Clusters

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Keywords

Videogames, game design, creative clusters, cultural policy, regulation, entrepreneurship

INTRODUCTION

Can state support effectively enable video game development? Unravelling the paradox of China's state sponsored creative clusters, this paper examines how policy, capital, and urban planning have built industries of enormous scale, but how these same forces have trapped cultural production into narrow, profit-centric pathways. This raises larger questions beyond China at the intersection of culture, commerce, and governance. This paper interrogates the question: Can top-down systems ever really nurture creativity, or do they inevitably push cultural industries toward safer, more marketable, and often more exploitative forms?

Since the late 1990s, China's manufacturing-driven economy has pivoted toward innovation and creativity, with games positioned as both a cultural industry and a site of digital growth. This shift, a key part of China's "Digital Great Leap Forward" (Yu, 2017), reflects how the country has tied economic development to creative technology through canny central planning. But unlike other parts of the world, where creative clusters and indie scenes have emerged from the ground up, China's digital development hubs and the game companies they house, have largely arisen via through top-down state policies and planning, manifesting in the form of special economic zones and technology and innovation precincts (Keane, 2009; Fung & Erni, 2013).

Within these digital development geographies, large companies have thrived (Zhan, Wang & Bi, 2024). However smaller studios and experimental ventures have tended struggle. High rents, heavy bureaucracy, and the prioritisation of financial return over creative risk mean that independent designers are squeezed out. Incubators and accelerators—celebrated in policies like "Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation" and "Internet Plus"—aim to nurture creativity, yet in practice, they tend to push studios to pursue safe, marketable ideas that place profit over originality (White & Xu, 2012; Huang, 2022).

This environment has had a direct impact on the kinds of games being made. Faced with constant financial pressure and fierce competition, many studios turn to formulaic approaches over experimentation. Innovation gives ways to imitation and developers fall back on aggressive monetisation techniques, such as gambling-style mechanics, loot boxes and microtransactions (Cheung & Fung, 2016; Xiao 2022). The resulting financially driven games previously termed as "Chinese Style Online Games" (Chew 2019) and "Capital Games" (Davies 2024) generate short-term revenue but at the cost of cultural depth, and creative expression.

Paradoxically, while these profit-driven design models have sometimes proven wildly successful, they have also prompted the state to introduce strict regulatory measures. Otherwise put, China's top-down development ecology simultaneously enables and constrains. It fuels rapid economic growth and global leadership in online gaming, but it also radically undermines the very creativity it works to support (Davies, 2025). Moreover, the same regulations apply equally to experimental and

commercial games, meaning that genuine creative projects face the same long approval process as predatory commercial titles.

Drawing on cultural policy research, industry studies, and examples from the Chinese game development ecology, this paper argues that while China's model has created a booming videogame sector, this success has occurred at the expense of originality and community-based creativity. This Chinese case study highlights the drawbacks of trying to manage innovation and creativity from above, while also echoing broader ideas of videogames as cultural and creative practice that require recognition and support beyond commercial frameworks (Keogh 2023).

BIO

Hugh Davies is a researcher of the social, cultural, and political dimensions of games and play. With a history of leadership roles in media production, arts management and museum consultancy, Davies brings his extensive knowledge and experience into tertiary education contexts. In addition to university lecturing internationally, he has co-authored two books: *Understanding Games and Game Cultures* (2021) and *Exploring Minecraft, Ethnographies of Play* (2020). He lectures at RMIT in Melbourne and is president of the Chinese Digital Games Research Association (CDiGRA).

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Understanding Small Video Game Developer Contexts in Australia and Japan

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Keywords

Video game production, small developers, Japan, Australia

INTRODUCTION

Japan is widely considered a dominant force and global leader in the international video game industry, while Australia's national industry is much more marginal (de Pablos, 2024; Jørgensen, 2019; Keogh, 2019). However, despite the Japanese industry's influence and international reputation, the smaller video game developers operating in its national industry have not been explored (Kobayashi and Koyama, 2020). Indeed, research into the diverse local contexts around the world that collectively make up the international video game industry is still fragmented and emerging (Daiiani and Keogh, 2022). Given the disparity in terms of the resources, business structures and experiences of small developers compared to large international developers like Nintendo, there are rich insights to be learned by understanding how a small video game developer located in a dominant industry (such as Japan) might differ compared to a small video game developer in a marginal industry (such as Australia). As such, this research explores and compares smaller, independent video game developers in Australia and Japan to understand their approaches to video game development and contribute understandings regarding the global industry (Kerr, 2017; Sotamaa, 2021). By comparing national industries, rich insights into differences in industry structures and cultures can be revealed (Eklund et al., 2024).

Given the lack of extant research, a qualitative and exploratory approach was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were utilised as the data collection method as they are an effective method of exploring and understanding small developers (Jørgensen et al., 2017; Jørgensen, 2019). Participants were recruited via the two authors networks. A total of 16 Australian developers from Melbourne, and 12 Japanese developers from Tokyo, the two cities that are the centres of the national industry in Australia and Japan, took part in the study. The interviews with the Australian developers were conducted

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in English by a native English speaker and the interviews with the Japanese developers were conducted in Japanese by a proficient Japanese speaker, who had been living and working in the country for several years. All of the participants were creating video games that they wanted the public to play and were actively developing or had released at least one game. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006) was utilised to analyse the interviews. The analysis was conducted manually and was an iterative and continuous process.

The results revealed differences in approach and mindset between the Australian and Japanese developers. The small Australian developers were more commercially minded and focused compared to their Japanese counterparts. The Japanese developers focused more on their personal tastes and interests when deciding what games to create and develop, which could explain this lack of commercial focus.

The small Australian developers were utilising a variety of marketing platforms such as social media including Instagram and Discord, in-person events, websites, Kickstarter and in-person events such as festivals and conventions. This spread of marketing activities and platforms was because all of the Australian developers felt that marketing was important for them and necessary for them to be able to develop a successful video game. In contrast, the small Japanese developers particularly emphasised the importance of attending and showing their games at conventions over other forms of communication, outreach and promotion. Interestingly, despite this difference in mindset, both the Australian and the Japanese developers agreed that they existed in a competitive industry. They found it difficult to breakthrough, gain attention for their games and obtain sales. However, the Australian developers responded to this competition with marketing and communication activities, while the Japanese developers did not. The Japanese developers were active and present at conventions and events but lacked a broader suite of communication channels.

The support available to the small Australian developers in the form of events and government funding and tax relief might make the Australian developers more confident that they can be successful and thus are more commercially focused with an integrated approach to communication. In Australia, if developers want to make and sell video games, they can access support. In Japan, the small developers had little government support. The Japanese national industry focuses very much on large, international developers and publishers with smaller developers feeling marginalised. Given that research into local production contexts is important to produce rich insights into the global video game industry (Daiiani and Keogh, 2022), this study has sought to compare small video game developers from Australia and Japan to shed light on both industries and advance knowledge of local production contexts.

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BIO

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A failure beyond words: *Baba is You*'s formalization of player subjectivity

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Keywords

Baba is You, enjoyment, failure, Lacan, psychoanalysis, signification, subjectivity

INTRODUCTION

Theorists of player subjectivity have struggled to account for the constitutive role of failure in gameplay. This is because the theoretical frameworks that have predominated in studies of player subjectivity are themselves ill-equipped to account for the constitutive role of failure in human subjectivity. Player subjectivity is often viewed as a product of ideological interpellation, wherein the player believes they are the symbolic identity the game industry wants them to be. But according to psychoanalysis, subjectivity is the result of a failed interpellation rather than a successful one. Subjectivity is a gap in discourse that ensures no individual fits seamlessly into their symbolic identity. As Alenka Zupančič (2025: 11:35) puts it, subjectivity “is an effect not of what is there in discourse, but of what is not there”. Videogames satisfy on the basis that they enable players to restage the constitutive failure of subjectivity under the guise of in-game failure. It is my contention, therefore, that we should locate player subjectivity in the repetition of in-game failure rather than the successfully interpellated individual.

For Jacques Lacan (2024: 152), subjectivity is an effect of the absence of any positive terms in language. A signifier generates meaning not through a positive relationship to a signified but through its differential relationship to other signifiers. Subjectivity is precipitated by the impossibility of a complete signified. What this means is that the subject cannot but fail to inhabit its meaning. I might describe myself as a “gamer”, for example, but the signified of that term is constantly retreating into the differential chain of signifiers. Even if I believe I am a gamer, I can never inhabit that identity completely. This failure provokes my desire. It prompts me to query what a gamer even is, what it means to be identified as one, and what more I could be doing to prove that I am one. Such queries ultimately go unanswered because there is no final signified, no Other who knows. This “lack in the Other”, as Lacan dubs it, lights a fire under the subject. It compels the subject to seek out an object that would fill this lack, but no such object exists. Failure is therefore immanent to subjectivity. When the subject’s attempt to become self-identical fails, it is reproducing the constitutive failure of subjectivity.

Videogames construct experiences wherein players can strive for but repeatedly fail to attain their object (Nicoll, 2025). This reproduces the process of subjectivation we all undergo as subjects of language. The repetition of failure in gameplay, like the retreat of the signified into the differential chain of signifiers, creates an illusion that complete satisfaction lies just beyond the next in-game challenge. But just as the signified retreats from us the moment we think we have it, so too does the complete

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satisfaction of gameplay. This is why gameplay produces more pain than it does pleasure. As Jesper Juul (2013:2) observes, we tend to experience failure in games more often than we do success. He sees this as paradoxical because he assumes that people do not enjoy failure and therefore try to avoid it under normal circumstances (cf. Ruberg, 2019). But for psychoanalysis, gameplay is psychically appealing precisely because it enables us to restage, and subsequently enjoy, the constitutive failure of subjectivity. While failure in gameplay is not pleasurable per se, it is psychically satisfying because it brings us into closer contact with the constitutive failure that founds us as subjects.

Lacan uses the term enjoyment, rather than pleasure, to describe the strange sort of satisfaction-in-dissatisfaction we get from circling but never attaining our object. Videogames of all types administer this enjoyment in droves. The point is not that failure in gameplay sweetens the eventual pleasure of success, but that failure is itself the source of player satisfaction, with success only offering a sort of second-rate pleasure. As Todd McGowan (2013: 32) puts it, “[p]rivileging loss as the source of our enjoyment means [...] that loss is its own reward. We don’t experience loss now in exchange for pleasure later but instead enjoy loss because it allows a privileged object to emerge”. While the player may believe that the pleasure of success is what they really desire, this belief masks the unconscious aim of gameplay, which is to enjoy failure. The alibi of pleasure allows the player to enjoy the repetition of failure while consciously believing that their goal is to attain success.

Player subjectivity is not the signified of gameplay—it is not a subject position the player inhabits—but an effect of the failure of gameplay to produce a final signified, a complete satisfaction that would end the drive to repeat failure. While players obviously complete games, completion brings only a yearning for new ways in which to enjoy failure. This enjoyment is the index of player subjectivity. Most games do not confront players with the connection between subjectivity and in-game failure, partly because it would be potentially confronting to do so, but also because player subjectivity cannot be directly represented. Any attempt to represent player subjectivity in a game is ipso facto a subject position the player can try (but inevitably fail) to inhabit, and therefore not subjectivity. Player subjectivity consists not in this or that subject position but in the player’s failure to fully inhabit a subject position. There are nonetheless some games that manage to expose players to their subjectivity—not by representing it, but by formalizing it through gameplay. *Baba is You* (Hempuli, 2019) is one such example. *Baba is You* uses its formal structure to reveal, but not directly represent, player subjectivity as an effect of in-game failure.

BIO

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All Talk, Some Action: The Complicated Trajectory of DE&I in Games

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Keywords

diversity, equity, inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) programs in the game development industry are cyclical, with resources being invested in DE&I during moments of scrutiny and then redistributed once external demands or requirements subside (Ahmed, 2012; Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Reactive initiatives are implemented in response to controversies concerning harassment and discrimination (Consalvo, 2012), political movements advocating for social justice (Gray, 2020), or shifting expectations from investors and consumers (Kerr, 2017; Harvey & Fisher, 2015). While this reactivity produces moments of visibility and investment in DE&I outcomes, it also tends to result in tokenistic efforts rather than structural change (Ahmed, 2012).

The United States has been central in driving whether DE&I is considered a priority in game development globally. As the dominant market for videogames, US shareholder expectations shape how multinational studios form their values and articulate their priorities to consumers (Kerr, 2017). Approaches to DE&I in the US—and, by extension, in markets closely tied to US shareholder and consumer expectations, such as Australia—changes in response to cycles of public attention, political backlash, and reputational pressures. DE&I is prioritised during periods of political contestation, such as the increased visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 (Gray, 2020; Nakamura, 2020) or the public reporting of gender discrimination at Activision Blizzard in 2021 (Paul, 2021; Lanier, 2021). In contrast, the current US administration and the subsequent backlash against DE&I in both corporate and political discourse (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016) is already causing some studios to shift resources and visibility away from inclusion efforts. While some other national contexts may not follow these fluctuations as closely, the volatility of US-led discourse remains particularly significant given the global influence of the American market.

RESEARCH METHODS

To interrogate the rise and fall of DE&I programs within game studios—as well as the effectiveness of these programs when they are implemented—this research draws on a

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mixed methods approach, combining: discourse analysis of shareholder reports, company websites, and archived communication over several years; semi-structured interviews with DE&I practitioners, consultants, and volunteers; and autoethnographic insights informed by professional experience within the game industry. This research approach is designed to provide reflexive depth on how programs are conceived, enacted, communicated, and undermined. This research is underpinned by exploratory questions that focus on when DE&I is emphasised, how effective programs are in practice, and where rhetoric and experience diverge.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

There is a tension between the original conception of DE&I programs and the expectations now placed upon them. Many initiatives—both inside and outside the game industry—were established as compliance mechanisms or reputational strategies, often in response to civil rights legislation and corporate accountability frameworks in the United States (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). This legacy continues to shape how programs are funded, staffed, and evaluated, with DE&I practitioners often holding symbolic roles rather than structural ones (Ahmed, 2012).

Interviews and autoethnographic insights indicate that this history produces frustration for workers. While game studio employees increasingly expect DE&I initiatives to deliver cultural transformation, DE&I practitioners, volunteers, and consultants are granted limited authority and resources. However, findings also suggest that there are strategies that can improve DE&I outcomes when implemented consistently. For example, programs can achieve greater impact when inclusive practices are integrated holistically across departments. Furthermore, initiatives that build collective capacity are more likely to secure the trust and participation of leadership. By contrast, poorly designed interventions risk reinforcing scepticism, especially if training is ineffective or leadership fails to act on employee feedback (Gray, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The volatility of DE&I's public visibility intersects with deeper structural questions about program design and purpose within the game industry. As explicit references to DE&I diminish in shareholder reports and corporate communications, studios with siloed or symbolic initiatives are particularly vulnerable; such programs can be excised quickly when political or market conditions change. By contrast, DE&I outcomes are more resilient in organisations that have embedded inclusive practices across their workflows, as inclusion becomes part of everyday operations rather than a separate, expendable function (Bulut, 2020).

The future of DE&I in the game industry depends less on the visibility of programs during moments of controversy and more on their ability to deliver tangible results and build trust within studios. Recognising the historical origins of DE&I as compliance-driven (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016) while addressing current expectations for systemic change is crucial if studios are to move beyond tokenistic gestures and towards sustainable cultural transformation. The challenge for both scholars and practitioners is to identify and support practices that integrate inclusion into the structures, cultures, and expectations of game development itself, rather than leaving DE&I to shift in parallel with political cycles.

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BIO

Dr Alayna Cole is a game studies lecturer and researcher, and has over a decade of industry experience across numerous roles. She has published many academic, journalistic, and creative works, which—though varied—are connected by her research interest in the intersections between marginalised identities and game development. Alayna was previously the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Manager at Sledgehammer Games, where she led initiatives that prioritised equitable labour practices and authentic game content for the *Call of Duty* franchise. Alayna has spoken about her work globally, including at a United Nations summit on gender-based violence and at several DiGRA and DiGRAA conferences.

All Video Games Are Animation, and Here's Why It Matters

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Keywords

Animation, production studies, movement, movement-image, illusion of life

INTRODUCTION

Mamoru Oshii once claimed that ‘all films will become animation’ (Oshii 2004), and Alan Cholodenko went even further, asserting that not only is animation a form of film, but film is also a form of animation (Cholodenko 1991). He also argues that all media is a form of animation (Cholodenko 2007), which makes video games, if seen as interactive systems of movement, even more so. This paper expands the concept of animation beyond its traditional boundaries by exploring its role in digital media through the lens of movement, the core element of animation and ‘animating’. The primary focus is on how animation mediates movement across different media, specifically films, video games, and robots, and what this framework brings to the existing research landscape.

Animation, fundamentally about endowing life or movement to static, lifeless, or ambiguous forms, exists at the threshold between reality and illusion, human and non-human, life and lifelessness in a Deleuzian perspective of *movement-image* (Deleuze 1986). By mediating movement, images are thus ‘animated’ into *movement-images*, while in the meantime characters as well as objects are brought to illusory life, creating an ‘illusion of life’ as Cholodenko describes (1991). This in-betweenness, echoing concepts from other theoretical traditions such as cyborgs (Haraway 1991) or liminality (Turner 1967), offers a powerful theoretical framework for understanding games: it foregrounds not only representation but also the embodied experience of movement that takes place in a medial space where opportunities emerge.

In practice, a range of cases can serve as evidence to substantiate this framework. Some video games surged in popularity during the pandemic because they offered immersive entertainment and virtual spaces for social interaction, allowing people to connect despite physical separation. Many animation studios even survived by producing cut-scenes for video games (Hirasawa and Mihara 2022). More crucially, video game production demonstrates how creative labour sets up rules and algorithms to automate the generation of movement. Developers and designers establish approaches that allow virtual characters and objects to respond dynamically to user inputs or environmental changes, blending creativity with computational precision (or chaos). Video games are

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therefore not only cultural artefacts or rule-based ‘procedural rhetorics’ (Bogost 2008), but animated spaces where movement is imagined, designed, and enacted.

Equally important is the perspective of production studies. Through the creativity and technical expertise of developers, animators, mocap actors, and riggers, movement is given form, characters and objects are animated, and stories come to life. More importantly, the creative talents also animate themselves in the process of their creation; they need to balance their lives with their passion, and devote themselves to the affective labour in order to make animations happen. This, as Gill describes, is an in-betweenness in the middle of the passionate, self-expressive work and the economic precarity that inherently come with it (2011). Ultimately, movement, whether crafted by hand, automated through algorithms, or performed by autonomous systems, can be seen as a form of creative labour and as a universal thread connecting diverse media forms. By centring animation as a conceptual perspective, this research aims to reposition video games as the hinge where traditional media (such as film) and new media (such as robotics) converge, while also revealing that video games themselves best demonstrate systems of animated movement.

In light of this, this research does not intend to challenge the ontology of video games but to reframe animation as an alternative perspective for understanding them. By positioning video games as forms of animation, the project foregrounds the production of movement itself. This reframing expands the theoretical concerns of animation studies into the realm of video game production, emphasising not only what players experience but also what developers actively seek to create through animation pipelines, procedural systems, and design choices. In doing so, it connects the cultural aspects of meaning-making in game design, such as how movement communicates identity, emotion, or atmosphere, with the technical and labour practices that give those movements form. The argument that all video games are animation thus becomes an ambitious attempt to unify existing strands of thinking: from cultural and experiential analyses of play to production-focused understandings of creative labour, ultimately situating games within a broader media ecology of animated movement.

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BIO

Will Mu is a second-year PhD student in Media and Communication at the University of Sydney. His research explores how movement is mediated as an ‘illusion of life’ across films, video games, and robots. Before beginning his PhD, he spent more than a decade in China working as a creative producer and project developer in film, VFX, and animation production houses, collaborating with directors and screenwriters to develop screenplays for films, animations, and TV series. He holds a Master’s degree in Media, Culture, and Communication from New York University.

A Messy Endeavour: Unravelling English Students' Experiences of Ludonarrative Empathy

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Keywords

Videogames, ludonarratives, empathy, digital game-based learning, *A Short Hike*, *FAR: Lone Sails*

INTRODUCTION

There are countless varied experiences of empathy that players can have through videogames, especially of those that involve storytelling. In these digital experiences, what is necessary is a form of 'bridging' through imagination, where instead of a videogame acting as an 'empathy machine', there is a clear awareness of an 'Other' and understanding of experiencing a game-world through that point-of-view (Andrejevic & Volcic, 2020; Carter & Eglinton, 2024). Compared to print texts, videogames involve participatory forms of textual imagination, making them distinct from traditional literary forms such as the novel or playscript. Keen (2007) explored *narrative empathy* as a phenomenon of readers experiencing empathy through its representations in literary fiction. However, videogames exist as procedural systems where meaning can be interpreted through both their gameplay and story elements within the player's surrounding cultural context and so are called *ludonarratives* (Ajoranta, 2015). Thus, experiences of player-empathy through videogames can not only just occur through controlling the player-character, but the player-character's perspective of others, with non-playable characters themselves, and in dynamic interpretations players can conjure. In this way, videogames are distinct from other forms of storytelling, involving a participatory form of narrative empathy which can be called *ludonarrative empathy*.

If there is propensity for engaging with empathy in multiple and varied ways as players, what are the potentialities for this within education? The classroom provides a stage or context for which to explore empathy with games. Prior research has highlighted positive impacts with the study of ludonarratives as texts in literacy engagement and learning (e.g., Altura & Curwood, 2015; Bacalja & Nash, 2023; Gee 2007). Whilst there have been previous empirical studies that note the presence of empathic interactions with ludonarratives (Ehret et al., 2022; Theodoulou & Curwood, 2023) what is yet to be detailed are the empathic connections existing within and between ludonarratives, student-players, teachers, play-incorporated pedagogy within a classroom context. Through a sociocultural and postdigital lens, the aim of this paper involves exploring how empathic engagement occurs in high school English, whilst critically examining engaging empathy for educational purposes. Empathy is part of human lived experience, however, there is risk of it

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being geared toward outcome and reward. By examining and exploring ludonarrative empathy in the classroom, we can understand how these dynamic interpretations and experiences of empathy emerge.

A key problem that emerges out of exploring ludonarrative empathy within educational environments is the tension between empathy as a developmental outcome and as an ordinary process. Experiencing empathy through literature in English can be messy (Horton, 2024). Experiencing and especially moralising empathy through textual study of videogames can be even messier. This paper seeks to untangle these empathic representations and connections that form through case study methodology of English classrooms engaging with commercially available videogames. In doing so, theoretical understanding of empathy through videogames can be advanced, which in turn can assist critical pedagogies of videogame use in education.

Two independent Sydney metropolitan secondary schools were recruited to explore separate case studies of English classrooms using games as texts for study. Teacher-participants in each school worked with the researcher in collaborative planning to integrate a videogame into an existing learning program. Games were chosen for study based on their appropriateness for Years 7 and 9 English, seeking: accessible themes and gameplay, short time to complete, and relevance to existing programs. These include open-world adventure game *A Short Hike* (2019) by Adam Robinson-Yu and side-scrolling adventure game *FAR: Lone Sails* (2018) by Okomotive. Teachers were provided resources such as textual information, as well as teaching strategies to consider, discuss, and implement according to their needs. Both teacher and student participants were interviewed before and after classes, and lessons involving videogames were observed. Semi-structured interview questions focused on empathic interactions with videogames and critical perspectives of empathy with videogames as texts. Following interview and observation data collection, thematic analysis was used to examine emergent themes and concepts, including discourse analysis of classroom observations.

In this presentation, I will detail the student experiences of ludonarrative empathy as they conceptually engaged with and played videogames in the classroom itself. This involves their experiences of engaging with the game before, during, and after explicit use of the game within lesson time. Emergent themes involve students engaging with empathy independently, engagement with empathy initiated by classroom learning, and non-engagement with empathy despite opportunity. Videogames are found to be culturally significant and hold literary and personal value within the eyes of the participants. However, there exists pedagogical, structural and curricular constraints which act as barriers for ludonarrative empathy. These findings suggest that ludonarrative empathy is not merely autonomic, nor can it be taken for granted; it is contingent on the individual player, framing, process and context within which it emerges when playing videogames.

BIO

Gerard Altura is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney, researching empathy and pedagogical use of videogames in secondary education. After writing his honours thesis on videogames as cultural texts within Australian classroom contexts, he taught junior and senior English in Western Sydney high schools.

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A Phenomenology of Breakdown: Avatar, Tools, and Ontological Friction

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Keywords

fumblecore, Heidegger, posthumanism, subjectivity, reviewers,

INTRODUCTION

This presentation applies Martin Heidegger's (1927/2008) tool-analysis to theorise player-avatar relations through three distinct modes of engagement: present-at-hand, ready-to-hand, and unready-to-hand. While prior scholarship (Bayliss, 2010; Conway & Elphinstone, 2017; Gualeni, 2015; Janik, 2017; Martin, 2012; Vella, 2013) has examined avatars through Heidegger's categories of readiness-to-hand (tools experienced as transparent extensions of embodied action) and presence-at-hand (tools objectively analysed as detached entities), this work foregrounds the underexplored unreadiness-to-hand, a mode where tools, even digital ones such as avatars, paradoxically reveal their contingent nature while remaining partially operational (Rautzenberg, 2020). This framework is deployed to analyse the fumblecore genre, a category of games defined by deliberately awkward avatar control. By examining moments of friction and failure in fumblecore play, this paper uses phenomenological analysis to make ontological claims about the avatar as a resistant and contingent entity. In doing so, it engages with posthumanist critiques of mastery and autonomous subjectivity, arguing that unreadiness-to-hand destabilises humanist assumptions about control, embodiment, and agency in digital environments (Wilde, 2023).

When encountered as present-at-hand, avatars become objects of reflection: their visual design, narrative role, or statistical attributes dominate the player's attention. In contrast, ready-to-hand avatars recede into transparency, enabling players to act *through* them, e.g., navigating a platformer's obstacles via intuitive movement. However, Heidegger's tool-analysis also identifies a third mode: the unready-to-hand, where tools disrupt engagement through: 1) conspicuousness (malfunction, e.g., input lag or glitches); 2) obtrusiveness (absence, e.g., locked abilities halting progress); 3) obstinacy (mismatch, e.g., a slow avatar clashing with time-sensitive challenges). These *breakdowns* (Ryan & Siegel, 2009) force players to oscillate between embodied action and reflective distance, exposing the avatar's dual role as both prosthetic and obstacle.

This framework is explored through a consideration of the 'fumblecore' genre, which features videogames intentionally designed for awkward, imprecise, or chaotic avatar control, often featuring exaggerated ragdoll physics. This 'frictional embodiment' often cause hilarity, and some argue that fumblecore games "enthusiastically embrace comedy as their *raison d'être*" (Ian Bryce, 2016, p. 87). Yet, beyond comedic value,

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fumblecore games offer compelling case studies of unreadiness-to-hand as a deliberate aesthetic and ludic strategy that causes a critical re-evaluation of the avatar as embodied prosthetic. In titles such as *QWOP* (Foddy, 2008), *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (Young Horses, 2014), *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* (Foddy, 2017), and *I Am Bread* (Bossa Studio, 2015), the avatar resists seamless incorporation by the player, becoming a site of failure, friction and negotiation.

Fumblecore games thus operationalize unreadiness-to-hand: breakdown not as something to be avoided, but as the very condition of play. Fumblecore avatars exemplify unreadiness-to-hand by being conspicuous when control malfunctions (e.g. in *Octodad*, the avatar's tentacle-based movement system produces unpredictable and imprecise response to input); obtrusive when absence of functionality halts progress (e.g. in *I Am Bread* the avatar's lack of conventional locomotion and manipulation abilities prevents transparent and frictionless interaction with the environment); obstinate when a mismatch between avatar's capability and game demands frustrates action (e.g. in *Getting Over It*, the avatar's hammer-based locomotion clashes with the precision and speed required by the terrain). These breakdowns reveal the avatar's dual role as both tool and barrier, inviting reflection on digital embodiment and the limits of control.

By analysing the fumblecore genre as an emblematic example of an unready-to-hand mode of play, this paper reframes player-avatar relationships as sites of 'designed-disunity'. These games challenge usability paradigms in user-centred design, where clear, consistent and transparent interaction is assumed to be the ideal mode of engagement for players. Fumblecore games thus shift the player's experience from one of mastery to one of failure, negotiation and adaptation. This shift also foregrounds the unique ontology of avatars, which are not extensions of the self or transparent vessels of intention, but rather resistant and contingent entities.

Such ontological instability aligns with posthumanist critiques of Cartesian subjectivity. Fumblecore avatars, in their conspicuousness, obtrusiveness and obstinacy, disrupt the fantasy of the player as a rational, autonomous agent, who projects intentionally onto a world through seamless technological incorporation. Instead, they expose the limits of conscious control, foregrounding the role of 'bodily' intelligence and motor competencies typically operating beneath conscious awareness. When these competencies are undermined, players may potentially confront the fragility of their own agency and the material conditions sustaining it (Ian Bryce, 2016). Through this destabilization of embodiment, fumblecore games reveal the player as a relational and distributed entity, embedded within a techno-material assemblage, where agency is contingent and embodiment frictional, and where humanist notions of subjectivity couched within discourses of mastery are rendered partial, situated, and ontologically entangled.

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BIO

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“Are babies worth it?”: Mediated Representations of Children in Digital Gaming

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Keywords

infants, children, character creators, dollhouse gameplay, domestic

INTRODUCTION

Infants and children are both mechanically and ideologically challenging subjects when represented in gaming. How real-world children and infants play and engage with digital texts has been explored thoroughly (Hamlen 2011; Ferguson & Olson 2013; Bassiouni & Hackley 2014) but despite their varied and distinct forms, presentations of younger humans and humanoid figures are relatively understudied. Emma Reay (2021; 2024) has written extensively about how children are presented in gaming and discusses the roles children play more broadly in these interactive texts. Reay has identified many of the roles children take on in gaming—including as heroes, martyrs, killers—and notes that the figure of ‘the child’ as they put is a “‘lightning rod’ for political and cultural controversy” (Reay 2021). Beyond this, how infants are depicted is usually tied to gestation and breeding (Gallagher 2025) or part of a broader content analysis exploring frequency of representation (Williams et. al. 2009; Jones et. al. 2025). Building from Reay’s work I want to further illuminate some of the ways games present children—in particular infants—to players. More specifically I want to explore the cultural, political, and sociological implications of what I term a ‘mediated child’—ie. a child that has not been explicitly created by a player but rather is the result of previous character creation input mediated through a system that determines a new output.

To explore what these representations of mediated children can look like I will analyse several key examples from gaming. Drawing from a broad range of texts including *Fable II* (Lionhead Studios 2008), *Rimworld* (Ludeon Studios 2018), *Hardtime III* (MDicky 2025), *Crusader Kings II* (Paradox Development Studio 2012) & *III* (2020), *The Sims 4* (Maxis 2014), *InZoi* (InZoi Studios 2025), *Medieval Dynasty* (Render Cube 2021), *Sunless Sea* (Failbetter Games 2015), *Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord* (Taleworlds Entertainment 2022), *BitLife – Life Simulator* (Candywriter LLC 2023) and more, I unpack the various impacts that including mediated children has. Building from scholarship surrounding character-creators (Iantorno & Consalvo 2023; King 2023; Harper 2020; Dietrich 2013) as well as domestic and dollhouse play (Brierley-Beare 2025) I outline how these representations negotiate class, race, gender and familial structure. I analyse the systems, structures, and resulting discourses that lead to the creation of an in-game ‘child’. While some will attempt to show gestation and delivery, other texts will

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instead elect to have babies ‘spawn’ overnight or through some kind of machine. How a child looks visually may be based on previous choices from a character creator, or by social factors, or may be drawn from a pre-determined set of characters. The child may become playable character and act as an ‘heir’ for the player, or they may be used as labour or capital, or they may simply continue to exist only in their child-forms. These distinctions are numerous but impactful and by recognising how particular systems produce new ‘children’ including what factors lead to their creation, what elements are included when it comes to the new permutations, and their functions and expected role in the interactive experience, we can see what value is placed on children in these games. I urge for the continued exploration of these unique and varied forms of child representation as well as recognise both the normative and transgressive potentials hidden within these newfound understandings of a ‘mediated child’.

BIO

Dr Amy Brierley-Bearé is a games researcher from the University of Adelaide. Her work looks at the trends and patterns in representations of romance in mainstream gaming. Brierley-Bearé’s research interests include productive play, emergent narrative, and audience studies.

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Attraction & Repulsion: The Abject Player in *Pathologic 2* & *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*

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Keywords

abjection, immersion, disempowerment, embodiment, *Pathologic 2*, *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*

INTRODUCTION

Within feminist games research, Julia Kristeva's theory of the 'abject' (1982) has been used as a unique lens through which to explore the common intersection between the horrific and the feminine. Defined as neither a 'definable object' nor a 'correlative' subject (Kristeva, 1982, 1), the abject can be understood as a liminal concept in which the strict, symbolic order of all that is known and accepted collapses and warps. Confrontation with the abject, often through a direct encounter with beings and monsters that Barabara Creed defined as the 'monstrous-feminine' (1993), is understood as a necessary part of re-establishing the symbolic order that gives human existence its inherent meaning.

Within the context of video games, previous feminist scholars have explored how, unlike the more passive viewership of films, videogames offer a unique narrative opportunity to thrust an 'embodied, situated' player (Keogh, 2018, 9) into direct, tactile confrontation with the abject. This confrontation emerges either as monstrously feminine enemies that may be repelled in ludic combat order (Harkin, 2020; Spittle, 2011; Stang, 2018) or as an explicit embodiment of an abject player-avatar who the player becomes to carve out a new simulated order for themselves (Bloomquist, 2021). However, this focus purely on the abject's ludic representations has subsequently neglected the noticeably abject position that a player themselves must occupy when immersing themselves in play.

Drawing from Kristeva's abjection as a theoretical framework, this paper will investigate how, rather than banishing the representational abject through their engagement with gameplay, an abject player must instead banish *themselves*—their fears, their morals, their very identity—in order to embody an avatar in a virtual world. Such abject embodiment, phenomenologically described as 'straddl[ing] worlds' (Keogh, 2018, 12) in an 'amalgam cyborg' body (Keogh, 2018, 14), elicits a constant negotiation between the boundaries' of the player's own self and their other, embodied self within the game. I further propose that this negotiation inevitably elicits a continual metatextual unease, whereby the player's interactions with a disempowering and frustrating game world continually draws their own abject, 'fragmented self' back to the forefront (Spittle, 2011, 318).

To best define how games writers and developer evoke this abject state of play, this paper will explore both Ice-Pick Lodge's horror role-playing game, *Pathologic 2* (2019) and Sandfall Interactive's turn-based role-playing game, *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* (2025). Adopting a 'close-playing' model of analysis (Paterson et al., 2019) whereby subjective played experiences are intermingled with theoretical frameworks, I define the player's abject state of play as facilitated by a constant push-and-pull of 'attraction and repulsion' to a game's world, narrative and ludic mechanics (Kristeva, 1982, 1). As such, the chosen case studies demonstrate the dual manner in which games manipulate a player into an abject state.

Though it ostensibly charms players with its visual and musical flair, *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* posits this very same charm as a mirage that leads players into an abject state of play. Set within a 'Canvas' that houses the soul of a man whose family squabble over the ruins in denial of his death in the outside world, the game's narrative continually juxtaposes the world's alluring aesthetic beauty with the violence that the player metatextually imposes on its characters through continuing their tortured existence. In continually immersing themselves into the game's world, the player themselves is framed as an abject invader into a beautiful, wondrous world that simultaneously wishes to be let go and laid to rest.

However, unlike *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33*'s deceptive immersion, *Pathologic 2* creates an abject state of play through repulsing the player from its world through continual ludic and narrative disempowerment. The narrative places the player within a seemingly backwater Russian town where they must cure a mysterious, seemingly otherworldly plague that has ripped through the streets. However, such a task is rendered almost impossible: combat is left intentionally janky; the player-character's perspective is made routinely 'unreliable' (Hope, 2024, 28); and non-player characters seem to only to 'ask profound questions and provide few answers' (Hope, 2024, 29). As such, the player's abject state of play emerges from their continual failed attempts to make sense of an otherwise senseless experience.

In alignment with prior feminist research into abjection, this paper offers insight into the transgressive modes of play that go beyond 'normative, dominant, technofetishist, and...masculinist' design (Keogh, 2018, 172). As the 'interactive presence of the player...complicates and broadens the storytelling potential of the medium' (Paterson et al., 2018, 17), there too must be a continued exploration and investment into the play styles and design ideologies that stand in opposition to the industry's still predominantly 'masculine values' of 'autonomy' and 'agency' (Keogh, 2018, 179).

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BIO

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Capitalist Games: *Disco Elysium*'s Critique of Capitalist Logics of Play

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Keywords

becoming, capital, *Disco Elysium*, failure, resistance, subjectivity

ABSTRACT

Over the last thirty years, scholars have often returned to an examination of the ways that capitalist and neoliberal logics function in and through videogames (Baerg 2009; Dooghan 2023; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; Garite 2003; Stallabrass 1993; Woodcock 2019; Yee 2006). For Yee (2006, 70), the ways in which videogames layer rewards and action “condition us to work harder...[they] are inherently work platforms that train us to become better workers.” For Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009, 192), games are ‘machines of subjectivation’ that ‘interpellate’ us into particular subject positions, preparing us to act in ways which reinforce capital’s military and consumerist logics. For Dooghan (2023, 15), players are “excellent agents of necropower” who accumulate through the production of death.

What these and other authors observe is that the logics of action offered to players of videogames often reflect capitalistic logics: games break down tasks so that players can maximise the efficiency of every action (deWinter, Kocurek & Nichols 2014); games encourage the accumulation of currency and experience points for the purposes of expansion and domination (Dooghan 2023; Morrison 2024); games build worlds for players to conquer as ruthless imperialists (Ford 2016). In each case, games appeal to, and reinforce, the desire for stability and control cultivated by our investment in capitalist systems. Failure, in these games, is a means to success (Juul 2013), a success that is itself equated ‘with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct and hope’ (Halberstam 2011, p. 89; see also Ruberg 2019).

Through observations from a close reading (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2011) of *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM 2019), I argue that, in its approach to failure, the game offers an alternative. *Disco Elysium*'s game-world is suffused with failure. The city in which the game takes place, Revachol, is governed by The Coalition, a collection of ‘ultraliberal’ capitalist nations that crushed a revolution in the city’s past. Reminders of the failed revolution lie throughout the game-world: dilapidated bunkers filled with rusted old weapons and forgotten books and statues from the revolutionary movement. Other failed ventures await the player in the dusty spaces of the game-world. Within the abandoned rooms behind a bookshop, the player can find the remnants of an project left behind by a game development studio that ran out of money. Similarly, the player can find a selection of old pinball machines in the backrooms of a hotel. Banfi (2024, p. 6, emphasis in original) argues that the inclusion of these machines in *Disco Elysium* is one way in which the game critiques capitalism, explaining that the production of pinball machines in the real world declined as companies realised that slot machines were more lucrative: ‘If games cannot generate enough profit, then they are dispensable’.

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Though the player cannot escape or directly resist capital, the game offers a critique of the commonplace gameplay mechanics observed by the authors above. It does this alongside an explicit, though complex, representational critique of capital. *Disco Elysium* saddles the player-character (PC) with debt, which changes the context of accumulation: the player accumulates in order to continue living in their hotel room, without which they cannot continue playing the game. At the same time, the game does not offer a fantasy of control. There are very few moments in which the player can ‘decide’ what happens in the game-world at large. The game’s dice roll system, and its filtering of most action through what is usually called a ‘dialogue system’ (Domsch 2017), frequently undermine the player at important moments. Failed dice rolls will often not only cause the player to fail to perform the desired task, and will also make the PC perform unintended actions.

I argue that the dominant forms of action facilitated by game-worlds offer a fascistic experience of agency: the subordination of the game-world to the often violent actions of a unified player-subject, a body whose capacities to act are measured, defined and protected. *Disco Elysium*, however, encourages the player to let go of their desire for stability or control and embark on a ‘becoming’ (Deleuze 1983) – by which I mean a process of transformation through failure and adaptation. In *Disco Elysium*, actions are almost never certain to succeed, and the player is constantly undermined by the PC and game-world. Because of this, the distinctions between player, PC and other components of the game-world are increasingly difficult to maintain: each act in, on and with the others. The player is becoming-failure, part of *Disco Elysium*’s critique of capital. They are one of the multitude (Hardt & Negri 2005) struggling against the relentless accumulation of the capitalist machine, rather than the one that stands outside of the game-world with the singular capacity to fix it.

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Ludography

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BIO

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Creating Worlds, Becoming Selves: Gender and Indie Game-Making on *itch.io*

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itch.io, indie game development, gender-diverse, affordances, gender affirmation

INTRODUCTION

While big budget “AAA” games dominate public discourse due to their commercial visibility, indie games constitute the vast majority of releases, offering radically different spaces of representation. In 2024, nearly 99% of new titles on Steam were indie releases (VG Insights 2025). Among these alternative creative spaces, *itch.io* has become a particularly prominent hub for creators of marginalised gender identities, with nearly half of its creators identifying as women or gender-diverse. Despite this and its relative popularity, the platform remains critically understudied. This study examines *itch.io* as a site where gender-diverse creators explore and affirm their identities through indie game-making, highlighting how the platform’s affordances and community practices enable forms of cyclical creative labour that challenge both the self and others’ notions of art and gender.

Game studies has made important strides in addressing the field’s intersections with gender, but research remains sparse beyond the cisgender binary and is largely framed from the player’s perspective. While some studies suggest that games enable experimentation with gender through avatars, narratives, or mechanics (Biscop et al. 2019; Morgan et al. 2020), fewer examine how creators themselves use games for identity work. Indie game scholarship often highlights how independent production allows for more nuanced storytelling through practices of countergaming (Galloway 2006), with Chang (2017) extending this to queergaming as a subversion of cisheteronormativity. Salter et al. (2018) further argue that such practices are structurally impossible within AAA production models. Although scholars like Ruberg (2020) have amplified queer indie creators’ voices, the platform-level contexts shaping their work remain underexplored. In particular, *itch.io* – arguably the most significant indie game distribution platform after *Steam* – has received little attention, with only a handful of works engaging it directly (Ho et al. 2022; Werning 2019). Crucially, no existing research examines its role in enabling gender identity exploration among creators, marking a significant gap at the intersection of queer game studies and platform studies.

To address this gap, this study draws on seven semi-structured interviews with gender-diverse indie game developers based in so-called ‘Australia’ who have published games on *itch.io*. Participants were recruited through community-based purposive sampling via online networks, with diversity in gender identities

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prioritised, though only one of the seven identified as a person of colour and none with English not as their native language – a limitation this paper encourages future research to address. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, transcribed, and analysed through abductive thematic analysis.

Findings reveal that *itch.io*'s technical and cultural environment enables forms of queer creative practice that resist industry norms. First, participants described an anti-commercial ethos: game-making as personal artistic practice rather than labour, free from AAA's entanglements with profit, gatekeeping, and the tech–military complex. Second, *itch.io*'s accessibility – low barriers to entry, flexible monetisation, and permissive content policies – supports creators whose work would be excluded elsewhere, including sexual or deeply personal narratives. Third, its affordances (e.g., free game publishing, bundles, jams, portfolio-like game pages, etc.) act as identity-building infrastructure, bolstering both expression and discoverability while fostering a participatory culture that encourages game development literacy. Fourth, participants described a feedback loop wherein personal games inspire others to reflect on their own gender identities and experiment with game-making themselves, sustaining a community of iterative queer creativity. It was also repeatedly noted that despite *itch.io*'s merits, the site does not exist in a vacuum and instead best serves as an anchor in a broader ecology of communities, both in-person and on adjacent social platforms like *Discord* and *Bluesky*. Across these themes, game-making functioned not only as individual self-articulation but as queer world-building – creating imagined futures, affective networks, and alternative socialities through shared digital practice.

This research contributes a platform-specific, creator-focused perspective to queer game studies and digital media research. It shifts attention away from AAA-centric narratives, foregrounding how infrastructural and cultural design choices shape creative autonomy, identity work, and community formation. By examining *itch.io* as both a technical platform and a socio-cultural ecosystem, this study demonstrates how marginalised creators navigate, negotiate, and transform digital spaces through their creative labour.

Future research should extend this inquiry by exploring comparative platform studies, cross-cultural samples, and the longitudinal dynamics of player–creator identity cycles in other participatory digital environments. Such work would further illuminate how digital infrastructures enable or constrain the cultural production of queer futures, and how marginalised creators continue to carve out spaces within and beyond the games industry.

BIO

Nik Tan-Mishra (he/they/他) is a Singaporean undergraduate student at the University of Melbourne writing their Honours thesis that is due for completion at the end of 2025. He has always been intrigued by the intersections between marginalised identities and the formation of digital communities through media – particularly games and fandoms – and is dipping their toes into the vast body that is game studies.

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Critical Femininities & Feminine Play

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Keywords

archival games, archival research, Critical Femininities, exhibition, femininity, gender, independent games

INTRODUCTION

Femininity operates across many paradoxes. It is simultaneously regulatory, controversial, restorative, and radical. And yet in scholarship – including Game Studies – femininity has been largely overlooked. As a concept prevalently attached to and discursively naturalised in girls and women, it is consequently devalued for its presumed unseriousness, frivolity, and anti-feminist sentiments — the latter of which speaks to its conservative and essentialist gendered underpinnings. Femininity however, has always been present in videogames and games cultures in its many contradictory forms. This paper considers how femininity’s complexities manifest and are actively engaged with in local independent games through a reflection on the 2024–25 exhibition, *Feminine Play*.¹

While emerging Game Studies is drawing attention to feminine traditions within ‘core’ videogame spaces through themes like domesticity and dollhouses (see Brierley-Bearé,

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2025; forthcoming), most scholarly analysis of femininity in games has logically been directed towards gendered industries, like 1990s girls' games (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Bohunicky & Milligan, 2020) and the 'designed identity' at the heart of casual games (Chess, 2017). Womanhood and femininity indeed overlap, although in such studies women players and gendered design appear to overshadow a nuanced interrogation of femininity itself as a cultural concept—whereas masculinity has been treated to a full dedicated volume dissecting its hegemonies, politics, and queer potential (Taylor & Voorhees, 2018).

The interdisciplinary field of femininities research helps to bridge this gap (see Dahl 2025, Hoskin & Blair, 2024). 'Critical Femininities' supports interpretations and articulations of femininity that account for its complexities. The field recognises plurality and thereby resists a universalising definition or subject. Femme Theory (McCann, 2018) supports femininity's detachment from womanhood and patriarchal subordination, while a 'Critical' lens addresses "the societal tendency to see femininity as inferior" (Hoskin & Blair, 2021, 5) without disregarding its regulatory norms. Femininity is treated as a "process" that is neither inherently empowering nor disempowering (McCann, 2018) but affectively connected to both "pleasure" and "pain" (Dahl, 2012, 59–61). In essence: Critical Femininities treats femininity seriously.

This was precisely the goal for Feminine Play. Co-curated by Stephanie Harkin, Xavier Ho, Mahli-Ann Butt, and Jini Maxwell, Feminine Play was an indie games exhibition held in two public locations in Melbourne, Australia — St Kilda Town Hall and ACMI. An open call was made to developers in Australia and New Zealand to submit digital or tabletop games, in-progress works, or interactive experimental projects that responded to any and all interpretations of femininity. An archival research visit to the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) Canberra and collaboration with ACMI meanwhile informed the exhibition's curated historical collection.

Three key forms of feminine play were unveiled. The first were games that value feminine traditions in works like *Sashiko* (Helen Kwok), *Candy Castles* (Olivia Haines), and *Banh Chung AR* (Nhu Bui) which appreciate feminine labour, expression, and craft. Second were games that reinterpret those traditions, as seen in games like *Ghost Cam* (Arch Rebels), which questions stereotypes of presumed-frivolous 'horse-girls' in a horror VR format, and *Don't Stop Girly Pop* (Funny Fintan Softworks) which unconventionally pairs femininity with first-person shooters. Third, several games radically upend those traditions, like *Thou Dost Bleed* (Ruby Quail) that challenges the coupling of reproductive suffering with embodied 'authentic' womanhood, and *The Cute Machine* (Martine Corompt), which transgresses the borders between cuteness, innocence, and violence.

Placed in conversation with archival commercial 'girl's games' from the NFSA as well as traditional gendered toys like dolls and dollhouses, a non-linear story was effectively presented: that games have *always* been feminine, that femininity contains multitudes, and that feminine games cannot be neatly categorised into 'positive' and 'negative' politics. Both the contemporary indie and more commercialised archival games demonstrated that feminine play holds the capacity for explorative, political, and

pleasurable expression. These overlapping themes attest to Critical Femininities' drive to recognise femininity as more nuanced than simply anti-feminist regression.

In 2023, Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* launched femininity to the mainstream. This ran parallel to trends that satirise, reinforce, and reclaim different forms of feminine expression — from ribbons, 'trad-wife,' 'soft girl,' and other "memetic aesthetics" (Wiens & McWebb, 2025). These discourses are not isolated from games and game culture. Equipped with Critical Femininities, events like Feminine Play invite us to reframe our understanding of the videogame medium, where femininities are valued and attended to as equally as masculinities.

NOTES

1. See feminineplay.org

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BIO

Dr Stephanie Harkin is a Lecturer at RMIT University in the School of Design, Games Program. Her research is interested in girls' digital cultures and feminine gaming histories. She was lead curator of the indie games exhibition *Feminine Play* (2024–2025) and is author of *Girlhood Games: Gender, Identity and Coming of Age in Video Games* (2025). She has previously published on gender and games culture in the journals *Game Studies* (2020), *Feminist Media Studies* (2024), and the *Journal of Femininities* (2024) and is a Chief Investigator on the 'The Australian Emulation Network – Phase 2' Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage project.

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Developer Agency in Navigating Gender-Inclusive Design: Insights from Avatar Customization

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Keywords

game development, developer, gender-inclusive, avatar customization

INTRODUCTION

Avatar customization is increasingly acknowledged as a critical site for gender expression and exploration in videogames (Han & Ho 2024; McKenna et al. 2022). In recent years, research has paid growing attention to the challenge of implementing gender-inclusive design within these systems. Existing work has identified a range of factors shaping developers' practices, such as limited resources, market logics, sociocultural environment (Han 2025), and external feedback (Kulik et al., 2021). However, while these studies provide valuable insights into the constraints shaping development, they often leave underexplored how developers themselves exercise agency in navigating and responding to these conditions.

Indeed, developers continuously negotiate with these intersecting factors throughout the entire development process. As Berg Marklund et al. (2019, 193) observe, although game development teams attempt to follow prescribed development processes, "ad-hoc development driven by subjective experience requirements is the most prevalent praxis across the industry" in reality. Likewise, Walfisz et al. (2006, 489) characterize decision-making in game development as "muddling through," with development direction and key decisions being continuously adjusted in response to actual progress. These observations suggest that, during the development, game developers actively work through overlapping and evolving structural conditions, making decisions that reshape both problems and solutions over time.

Thus, this research reframes the discussion by centering on developer agency, examining how developers negotiate the complexities of gender-inclusive design under constraint conditions. It draws on ten semi-structured interviews with developers of diverse roles, gender identities, and cultural backgrounds¹. Through multiple rounds of coding in NVivo 15, the interview transcripts were systematically examined to identify recurring categories and refine them into four key themes:

- **Early-Stage Planning:** developers emphasized that technical and financial barriers become much harder to overcome later in production. By integrating inclusive features into the design pipeline from the outset, they could minimize costs and avoid major rework. Early planning not only prevented technical obstacles but also generated reusable strategies for future projects.

- **Proactive Team Dialogues:** through discussions, developers coordinated across teams and departments, negotiated scope, and built consensus. Although time-consuming, these discussions facilitated creative exchange and smoothed workflow, ensuring that inclusivity remained on the agenda throughout development.
- **Fostering Team Culture:** developers highlighted the importance of cultivating an open, respectful, and diverse team culture. Diversity alone was insufficient unless paired with inclusive practices that enabled all members to voice concerns and contribute to design decisions (Vedres and Vásárhelyi 2023). In such environments, developers reported renewed motivation and greater capacity to advocate for inclusive change.
- **Persuading Leadership:** developers stressed that leadership approval was decisive for resource allocation and the prioritization of inclusive design goals. Developers often had to frame inclusivity as a business case, carefully tailoring their arguments to align with managerial or investor concerns. Persuasion was thus a crucial strategy for transforming inclusive ideas into actionable development tasks.

These findings resonate with broader critiques of how knowledges and power operate in the games industry. Existing studies indicate that the industry has long been regarded as market-driven (Keogh 2019), with design decisions often dependent on commercial data analysis (Seif El-Nasr & Kleinman 2020). Developers must therefore frame inclusivity not simply as a design principle but as a business case, using reports and analytics to persuade leadership. As Foucault (1980) emphasizes, dominant knowledge regimes often constitute themselves as “objective” and “neutral” authorities through formalized, systematized practices. In the process of knowledge production, the needs, experiences and voices of gender-diverse players become “subjugated knowledges”², while the dominant knowledge regime continuously reinforces binary gender norms to maintain its own legitimacy and power.

However, the four key themes identified in this study reveal an “insurrection” of subjugated knowledges (Foucault 1980). The reemergence and collective voicing of those knowledges that have been marginalized or obscured is the very impetus for critical practice. In other words, developers are not merely passive recipients; instead, they actively intervene within this dynamic network and employ strategic actions. In doing so, game developers thus have great potential to contest and reshape existing power structures to provide critical momentum for the implementation of gender-inclusive design.

BIO

Yisong Han is a PhD candidate at Monash Art, Design and Architecture (MADA) at Monash University. Han’s research focuses on gender diversity and inclusion in videogame avatar customization, and his recent work appears in *Games and Culture*. He serves as Student Officer of DiGRA for the 2025–2027 term.

ENDNOTES

1 Full demographic information of interviewees is provided in Han (2025).

2 I draw on Michel Foucault’s (1980) concept of “subjugated knowledges.” Foucault explains that this concept has two dimensions: on the one hand, it refers to “those

blocs of historical knowledge which were present but disguised within the body of functionalist and systematizing theory”; on the other, it points to knowledges that were considered “disqualified” and “located low down on the hierarchy” (1980, 81–82). Applied to game development, I use this concept to reflect on the knowledges of “what players like/care about/need,” and to examine why these knowledges are favored in decision-making.

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Divine and Sublime: A Gothic Examination of Impossible Hero's Journeys in *Eternal Ring*

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Keywords

Hero's journey, Joseph Campbell, Gothic, Gothic sublime, divine world, magic flight, failure, videogames, *Eternal Ring*

INTRODUCTION

In *Eternal Ring* (FromSoftware, 2000) there is a forest. This forest is only mentioned once: "Don't go past the bridge. That forest is too dangerous for you right now." This warning is never retracted. Nothing instructs you to enter the forest. No one mentions the forest again. You may complete the game without seeing the forest at all. This forest full of mist, monsters, and winding paths seems endless but fan-made walkthroughs and maps reveal it is deceptively small and has no final reward, sign of completion, nor apparent purpose. You must either leave the forest or die in the forest. This rewardless detour seems antithetical to Christopher Vogler's film-based linear hero's journey (Vogler, 2007), but it demonstrates the divine world of Joseph Campbell's original maze-like hero's journey (Campbell, 2004). This paper uses Gothic scholarship to examine *Eternal Ring's* forest as a Campbellian divine world where the player, as hero, can only fail.

Campbell describes the hero's journey as an adventure out of the human world where "men who are fractions imagine themselves to be complete" (Campbell, 2004, p. 201) and into the divine world of "strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delights" (ibid., p. 53) that cannot be comprehended by rational minds. In this "fateful region of both treasure and danger" (ibid., p. 53) the hero encounters "darkness, horror, disgust, and phantasmagoric fears" (ibid., p. 111). To survive, they must endure "the terrifying assimilation" (ibid., p. 202) of the "absolutely intolerable" (ibid., p. 99) or escape back to the human world.

These descriptions bear a striking resemblance to Gothic literature. Gothic stories take place in settings "excluded by rational culture" (Botting, 1996, pp. 21-22), such as gloomy forests and craggy mountains where darkness, supernatural incidents, and infinite power inspire awe, terror, despair, and expand human knowledge. Gothic settings, scenes, and objects evoke "not only repugnance, disgust, and recoil, but also engage readers' interest, fascinating and attracting them. Threats are spiced with thrills, terrors with delights, horrors with pleasure." (Botting, 1996, p. 6)

Campbell's hero, unlike Vogler's, can fail the adventure and Campbell gives many examples of mythic heroes who fail. However, Campbell insists the horrors of the divine world are "not as brutal as they seem" (Campbell, 2004, p. 119). Heroes who

“know and trust” (ibid., p. 66) will be “gently carried along by the guiding divinities” (ibid., p. 201) and assimilate the divine world’s misunderstood horrors in what Campbell calls the hero’s “apotheosis” (ibid., p. 138f). Heroes who fail are “lesser men” (ibid., p. 106) who did not correctly submit to “the initiatory tests” (ibid., p. 34) laid before them. An insufficient hero “beyond his depth” (ibid., p. 77) must flee the divine world in a “magic flight” (ibid., p. 182f) or be “crucified, like Prometheus” (ibid., p. 34).

A player can neither complete nor succeed in *Eternal Ring*’s forest. Campbell does not dedicate much discussion to unworthy heroes beyond their role as cautionary tale. There is also little scholarly work examining Campbell’s ideas (Moran, 2024; Rensma, 2009; Segal, 1987). This paper draws on Botting’s (1996) discussion of Gothic literature, Krzywinska’s (2015) discussion of the Gothic in videogames, and Mishra’s (1994) discussion of the Gothic sublime to analyse *Eternal Ring*’s forest as a Campbellian divine world that can neither be mastered nor assimilated.

The Gothic sublime is associated with “grandeur and magnificence” on a scale “beyond rational knowledge or human comprehension” (Botting, 1996, p. 2). The sublime is unrepresentable, inexplicable, and “threatens our very capacities of cognitive judgement” (Mishra, 1994, p. 16). Unlike Campbell’s optimistic assurance that the divine world can not only be mastered but doing so will release the hero from desire and fear, Mishra (1994, p. 19) says the Gothic sublime “is always an overglutted sign, an excess/abscess, that produces an atmosphere of toxic breathlessness.”

Gothic scholarship offers a more nuanced discussion of Campbell’s divine world as “the unthinkable, the unnameable, and the unspeakable” (Mishra, 1994, p. 23) rather than as a puzzle to be solved and allows us to consider the magic flight as an act of survival rather than a failure. While Campbell is wholly optimistic, the Gothic emphasises ambivalence and the impossibility of resolution. From a Gothic perspective, Campbell’s glorification of mastery is hubris. The knowable parts of *Eternal Ring*’s forest seem a small fraction of “an idea too large for expression, too self-consuming to be contained in any adequate form of representation” (Mishra, 1994, pp. 19-20). To grasp the forest in its entirety would mean a “surrender of the law of reason” (ibid.) *Eternal Ring* is merciful in not allowing us to see it.

BIO

Jacqueline Moran received her PhD from Swinburne University of Technology in Australia, where she teaches game studies and writing for interactive narratives. Her research focuses on the hero’s journey, particularly Joseph Campbell’s work and the way it is (mis)understood and (mis)used in game studies and design, with a special interest in narratological and phenomenological approaches.

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Ecomon Go: Cultivating an Ecocritique of the *Pokémon* Franchise

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Keywords

Pokémon, climate change, ecocriticism, contradiction, aesthetics, materialism

INTRODUCTION

Pokémon is a globally resonating media franchise, considered by some sources to now be the most profitable media franchise of all time (Koepp 2025). Just as *Pokémon* connects players around the world, its transmedial outputs further sedimented gaming culture's stakes in mainstream media cultures, if not surpassing its boundaries entirely (Heckman 2019). Emerging in the 1990s, a decade which likewise witnessed the first substantial climate change conventions (including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992 and its implementation in the Kyoto Protocol of 1997), and its proliferation in the public imaginary since, *Pokémon* must be considered as intricately connected with the sensibilities of the climate crisis. This paper progresses an ecocritical understanding of *Pokémon* that is in touch with the extensive contradictions of both aesthetic and material realities in media industries (Maxwell and Miller 2012; Cubitt 2017), and especially the games industry (Abraham 2022; Chang 2024). As such, this paper conducts a literature review of existing ecocritical scholarship on *Pokémon* to foster the franchise's designation as an emblematic research topic to further unearth the contradictions of ecomedia as the climate crisis proliferates. Furthermore, it suggests that the *Pokémon* franchise should be at the vanguard of ecocritical game studies, not in spite of, but because of its global success and potential to resonate with a variety of audiences.

Pokémon has a longstanding yet fragmentary ecocritical application in scholarship. Andrew Balmford and co-authors (2002) concluded that *Pokémon* was more successful in making children cognisant of virtual wildlife than conservationists are successful in promoting physical wildlife, prompting the question: "Is Ecomon the way ahead?" In the context of the climate crisis' development toward the current predicament of its everyday palpability (Bould 2021; Ripple et al. 2024), the progressive potential of *Pokémon* for ecopolitical negotiation is underscored by the franchise's increasing engagement with questions associated with the climate crisis, such as biodiversity, resource management and animal welfare (Alcott and Maavara 2025). Moreover, the franchise's habit of basing its fictional regions on physical locations facilitates ecological analyses of how they relate to and represent situated realities (Kennedy 2025) as well as geophysical realities (McGowan and Alcott 2022).

Complicating its ecopolitical significance, multiple scholars note the contradictions prevalent in *Pokémon*. These include the contradictions of the franchise's titular creatures as both companions and monsters (Ford 2025), and the mechanical paradox of the games, which formulate its progression systems of making *Pokémon* creatures

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more powerful for human-directed battle sports as intertwined with the valuation of them as animals with unique and vital relations to the land they and their human masters inhabit (Bainbridge 2014). Since *Pokémon* is therefore consistent with the spirit of many popular media that at once reveal and embody such contradictions (Cubitt 2005; Parham 2016), the impetus of this initial assessment is to study how understandings of the *Pokémon* franchise as an ecopolitical phenomenon can be enhanced through, instead of in spite of, these contradictions.

This paper develops the argument that the contradictions of *Pokémon* both substantiate and complicate some fundamental ecocritical understandings of games. Chiefly, Alenda Chang's (2019) concept of games as *mesocosms*, i.e. mini-ecosystems that model environmental processes, can be considered through the lens of *Pokémon*. This theoretical connection can be productive both because of the franchise's reliance on physical locations for its world-building, and in *Pokémon*'s interpretation of animals as at once indispensable to the environment, and commandable by humans for recreational purposes. This phenomenon underscores understandings of the climate crisis as intricately interrelated with modern life's neoliberal conditioning (Chakrabarty 2009; Klein 2015; Moore 2016). At the same time, *Pokémon*'s scientific kernel of understanding, categorizing and collecting wildlife creatures according to its essentializing 'Pokédex' relates to both the scientific substantiation of conservation efforts, and a reliance on a universal idea of an external 'Nature' (Latour 2004) that can be mapped and explained away by increasing technical dominion over the environment (Bianchi 2024).

Beyond this conceptual level, *Pokémon* suggests a complication of aesthetic and material concerns in ecocriticism as well. Whereas the global success of games like mobile game *Pokémon Go* demonstrate the emancipatory influence of the franchise to have players engage with their local environments (Dorward et al. 2016), their reliance on energy-intensive mediation likewise suggests that this reconnection must itself come at an additional environmental cost. Conversely, even though *Pokémon* games have historically been materially confined to fit the less power-intensive hardware of handheld games, their aesthetics follow the tendency of mainstream games to desire more expansive worlds, utilizing more features and things to do (Atkins 2006; Nieborg 2011) – and culminating in more extensive, expansive and emissive games.

Considering these constitutive elements of the *Pokémon* franchise, this paper urges ecocritical game scholarship to cultivate new ecopolitical understandings of *Pokémon*, especially as it is a media franchise with a history of making a global impact. Regardless of the contentious question whether games can change the world for better (McGonigal 2011; Raessens 2019), *Pokémon*'s global impact attests to the fact that new ecopolitical imaginaries can easily proliferate under the fraught circumstances of the climate crisis.

BIO

David Harold ten Cate is a PhD Candidate at the Digital Media Research Centre of Queensland University of Technology. His PhD research concerns the ecopolitical interrelations of videogames between aesthetic, industrial and environmental perspectives. These interrelations are conceptualized as a dialectic between finite and infinite ideas of games. Embracing this dialectic as a productive contradiction, rather than one in need of resolution, his research pursues new avenues of understanding games within ecomedia theory.

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Environmental Hostility and Regional Specificity in the Post-Apocalyptic Noongar¹ Landscape of *Broken Roads*

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Keywords

landscapes, coloniality, Australian, post-apocalypse, *Broken Roads*

INTRODUCTION

In Australia, colonial views of the environment posit land as an exploitable resource to be farmed and mined, “untouched” wilderness to be tamed through landscaping and city-building, hostile wastelands to be traversed cautiously, and property to be owned—all the while refusing to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ dispossession and displacement in these processes (Collingwood-Whittick 2008). Literature is beginning to reveal how these tropes are being reproduced and inform landscape representations in videogames (Barnes 2021; Bird 2021; Brazelton 2020; Magnet 2006; Murray 2018; 2024), and to address implications of videogame representations of the environment on the real world and vice versa (Abraham 2022; Aghoro 2025; Chang 2011; 2019; Nelson 2023; op de Beke et al. 2024). This includes a growing understanding of videogame landscapes as highly ideological sites, urging increased attention to the analysis of colonial tropes in these representations (Murray 2018, chap. 3; 2024; Magnet 2006).

This paper contributes to this research by examining colonial undercurrents—and possible departures from such—in landscape representations in the Australian narrative-driven role-playing game *Broken Roads* (Drop Bear Bytes 2024). *Broken Roads* is set on post-apocalyptic Noongar Country, in the distinctly Australian landscape of the Wheatbelt Region of Western Australia. Specifically, I argue that representations of environmental hostility reproduce colonial tropes of alien, “exotic” landscapes, while a focus on regional specificity challenges these tropes. The tension between these contrasting interpretations also highlights the inherent complexity in performing (de)colonial readings of videogame landscapes.

To examine coloniality in *Broken Roads*, I build on Murray’s (2018, chap. 3) view of “landscapes as ideology” (142) and Magnet’s (2006) notion of the “gamescape” (142). Both argue that landscapes in videogames are intentionally constructed within—and representative of—a specific set of values, ideals and relations, and thus work to “naturalize” (Murray 2018, 142) these. Grounded in the idea that real-world and representations of landscapes encode notions of power relations (Mitchell 2002; Nelson 2023, 3), the gamescape in *Broken Roads* functions as a lens through which to examine

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social and cultural relationships with the environment in Australia's settler-colonial imaginary, where "landscape has always occupied a central place" (Collingwood-Whittick 2008, 59).

Drawing on the gamescape, literature on Australian landscape representations in other media and decolonial game studies, I will offer a close analysis of the gamescape in *Broken Roads*. The game's post-apocalyptic setting and representations of heat and drought mirror early colonial ideas of "exotic" environments as alien, hostile and uninhabitable (Horn 2017, 8). Furthermore, as this hostility is conveyed textually rather than visually or mechanically, a sense of distance is created between the characters/player and the landscape. Rather than enabling the player, through their avatar, to build a relationship with the landscape, it functions as a backdrop for the narrative and character movements, again signifying a colonial, detached rather than relational conceptualisation of the environment (Barnes 2021, 79).

However, *Broken Roads* also departs from colonial tropes. It is precisely through the detachment of the player from the landscape that colonial views of the land as something that exists to be consumed and reshaped are defied, for example, through a very limited capacity to exploit natural resources (Brazelton 2020). More importantly, *Broken Roads* focuses on the regional and cultural specificity of Noongar Country. For instance, consistency in the visual rendering of the landscapes across the game world favours regional specificity of Noongar Country over the spectacle a host of "exotic" landscapes may provide (Bird 2021). Additionally, Indigenous representation is intimately tied to the representation of landscapes in videogames, which have commonly erased Indigenous peoples from virtual environments, or have opted for generic, stereotypical and culturally disconnected representations (Bird 2021; Lagace 2018).² The inclusion of playable and non-playable Noongar characters, Noongar language and references to Noongar culture and knowledges in *Broken Roads* highlights cultural specificity and asserts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' survivance in the environment of the post-apocalyptic future—another space that is dominated by colonial tropes of erasure, dispossession and extinction (Topaum 2025).

In settler colonial contexts such as Australia, ongoing, critical work is required to reveal how coloniality as ideology informs our creation and understanding of cultural texts, and to investigate possibilities and limitations in departing from a colonial understanding of the world. Working from a settler-migrant position, I acknowledge that this can be an unsettling and challenging task, however one that we must participate in. Through my analysis of landscape in *Broken Roads*, I hope to demonstrate some of the many nuances and contradictions inherent in such an enquiry.

ENDNOTES

¹ Noongar Country is located in the south-western corner of Western Australia, where Noongar people have lived and taken care of the land for at least 45,000 years. Noongar people are made up of fourteen language groups, each of which has deep connections to a different geographic area (South West Aboriginal Land & Sea Council 2025).

² I acknowledge the tensions inherent in discussing Indigenous representation through the lens of landscape, especially in the Australian context, in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' treatment has been likened to that of animals (Wewer 2018). However, excluding Noongar people from a discussion of Noongar Country also risks replicating colonial practices of separating and erasing First Nations peoples from their lands. Thus, while I will discuss Noongar representation in the context of regional

specificity, I endeavour to do so with care, and within the limitations of my settler positionality.

BIO

Ambrin Hasnain (she/her) is a PhD student at the University in Melbourne on Wurundjeri Country. With a strong interest in decolonial theory and anticolonial movements, Ambrin is interested in understanding how coloniality informs everyday practices, creative expressions and cultural products. Her PhD project examines colonial and decolonial tropes and practices in Australian video games. She has a background in English literature, cultural studies, and arts and cultural management.

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Exploring Hybridised Storytelling in Story-driven Boardgames

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Keywords

Hybrid boardgames, Story-driven boardgames, Storytelling, Tabletop

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Digital tools automate elements of tabletop play to make games more usable, but this can negatively affect the player experience depending on *what* is automated (Kankainen, 2016; Larsson et al., 2020; Wallace et al., 2012). Players accept hybridisation which automates “chores” – labour necessary to articulate a game (Xu et al., 2011) – thus allowing more time to engage with the “core” gameplay (Soraine & Rogerson, 2024). For story-driven games, like the *Adventure* and *Crossroads* games series, storytelling functions seem to be “core”. However, technologies like virtual dungeon masters (Ang et al., 2023) show there is interest in hybridising storytelling functions. This preliminary work explores how players feel about apps for story-driven hybrid digital boardgames to find the “core” of this genre.

We conducted a small study using *Adventure Games: The Volcanic Island* (Dunstan et al., 2019) – a cooperative story-driven campaign game¹ that can be played with either a physical booklet or storyteller app. We recruited eight groups of 3-4 players (29 players total) to play 45 minutes of the first chapter of the game. For the first fifteen minutes, groups used the app, after which they could use any storytelling method (app, booklet, or both). Post-session, the players completed a survey and a semi-structured group interview about the experience. We present here three preliminary themes from our data:

Convenience – Every group played the full session with the app, stating that it was more convenient than reading and it centralised information on the table. Players noted that the app prevented accidental spoilers and minor forms of cheating (e.g. reading ahead). The app preference was strong despite a strong dislike of the narrator and complaints about the app functionality (e.g. not auto-scrolling).

Roles and Responsibilities – Players informally divided labour between themselves during the game. The recurring roles we saw were app-manager (handling interaction with app), game coordinator (double checking rules and keeping the game on track), and notetaker (cataloguing important-seeming information). Players discussed frequently taking on these roles for other games and in other play groups.

Social connections – Players described the primary goal of the game as being social, with the story as an activity to facilitate this socialisation. Players described the enjoyment of collaborating and arguing with each other, and despite some conflicts, no player would want to play the game solo.

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This study suggests that the “core” activity of story-driven boardgames may be the social interaction, rather than the story itself. Since the app alleviates some of the labour without interfering with the social experience it is seen as superior to the booklet. These findings are consistent with elements that are known to be important to players in tabletop roleplaying games like Dungeons and Dragons (Liapis & Denisova, 2023). Our findings are limited by our focus on a singular game which the players describe as a “choose-your-own adventure” novel, and our choice to use the published app which has minimal functionality. Future work should explore more interactive storytelling apps for similar games.

BIO

Melissa Rogerson is a Senior Lecturer in Human-Computer Interaction and ARC DECRA Fellow in the School of Computing and Information Systems at The University of Melbourne. Her research examines the play of boardgames in both physical and digital forms, as well as the characteristics and motivations of hobbyist boardgame players, designers, and developers. She is currently researching the uses and application of technology in boardgames.

Sasha Soraine is a Post-Doctoral Researcher in Human-Computer Interaction in the School of Computing and Information Systems at The University of Melbourne. Her research focuses on understanding player and spectator experiences of tabletop and digital games, game design, and player communities. She is currently working on the use and application of technology in boardgames.

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¹ A style of boardgame that takes multiple gameplay sessions to complete.

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Four design patterns for playful sonic interaction with place

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Keywords

play, sound, liveness, urban play, improvisation

INTRODUCTION

Urban play invites novel ways of relating to cities that re-shape our experience of public space (Stevens 2016, Innocent 2024). Through an analysis of an urban play work YomeciBand, we present four design patterns for using sound to invite play, highlighting the works live and improvisatory forms of performance to foster social interaction and public participation through urban play.

Sonic experiences in urban play are constantly in flux and changeable, open to the dynamism and spontaneity of playing in public space. We have been experimenting with live and improvised performance and interaction of sound in a series of urban play events titled 'YomeciBand'. This work is a site-specific installation, developed in Melbourne, Australia, that runs as a two-hour pop-up event in a public space or on a footpath. A chalk track is drawn on the ground with clusters of shapes and lines suggesting varied movements, resembling a hopscotch track or obstacle course. Participants can walk, hop, skip, jump or move around however they prefer to activate sound and compositions. These audio compositions and tunes are activated live by an inconspicuous sound performer playing a portable synthesiser who observes the players' movements across the pavement drawings. The interactive sound world that emerges is playful and responsive to a wide range of relations and interactions such as participant's play, surrounding urban activities and the urban soundscape. Live sound playing is used as a form of improvisational and relational sonic interaction design (Franinović & Serafin 2013), open to the many interconnected elements; people, play, materials, flora, fauna, infrastructure, sounds, actions and so on that inform and constitute the event.

We share four design patterns applied in practice through the work, focusing on YomeciBand's live performance and outlining the ways sound, play and place co-constitute each other moment-to-moment in this urban play event.

Design Patterns: Playful sonic interaction with place

1.1 Easing in

Sound is used to 'ease' participants into interaction with the work. When a player approaches YomeciBand, we play a subtle percussive backing track to suggest interactivity and rhythm. This is an invitation to play through sound, walkers often

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leaving their “public privacy” bubble (Bull, 2015) and engaging with their surroundings and the work through this prompt. This track is played to propel people into action and is often played whenever we observe people who appear interested or curious about the work but were perhaps hesitant to immediately participate. This backing track, intended to remain subtle in the background, is made up of playful percussive beats, simple and repetitive as if patiently waiting for something to occur. It’s an invitation to ‘ease in’ to the YomeciBand work.

1.2 Playful encounter with the urban environment

An integration of the materiality of the work with the surrounding infrastructure creates opportunities for playful encounters with the urban environment. Players of YomeciBand move around and interact with the chalk drawings to trigger sound, the sound performer observing and responding to their traversal across the ground and interaction with surrounding infrastructure. We use a range of ‘one-shot’ impact sounds that suggest different ‘materials’. For example, the ground of the play space can sound wobbly, crunchy and twinkly although it is made of concrete or asphalt. These unusual sound effects as a player interacts with the infrastructure of the location creates an ‘interaction gestalt’ (Lim et al 2007) of playfulness - the whole environment becomes playable with the player and their actions intertwined in constructing this experience. The urban environment is transformed through this kind of material play with live sound.

1.3 Playing together

Through YomeciBand, we become co-players with players and the city itself. A key approach in terms of sound is the use ‘sound tails’ to invite action and play. As the sound performer observes an action, they play sounds in response and play a brief ‘tail’ for this sound, whether prolonging the current sound, layering it using another sound or adding an effect on top. This is to prompt the player to take further actions, or follow through on a current action, such as regaining balance after a leap or anticipating a jump. We also ‘smudge’ the line between play and non-play in our live sound performance, playing sound to fringe or seemingly peripheral actions as well as intentional ones, to affirm that any interaction is ‘correct’ and to encourage further ideas and actions from players.

1.4 Playful sonic relationality

Although sometimes played solo, people often play with others in YomeciBand. Players have described their experience as “co-creating”, “being part of something together” and “contributing to a sound stew”, with everyone bringing different ingredients. They also described listening to what others were already doing, and seeing how they might join in with their play. Composing, harmonising, synchronising and jamming were among the ways players engage with sound through collective actions.

In conclusion, this paper has presented four design patterns for using sound to invite urban play in place. In highlighting the creative and experimental methodologies of live and improvisatory sound performance in YomeciBand, we advocate for the compelling potential and coalescence of sound and play to bring people together in public space.

BIO

Uyen Nguyen is a designer, researcher, and academic at RMIT University, Melbourne. Her work connects sound, place, play, and people. Collaborating with artists, game designers, creative producers, research partners and cultural organisations, her gallery-based and site-specific works have been shared in national and international venues, events and exhibitions including Experimenta, Tarra Warra Museum of Art, DIGRA, ISEA, Freeplay and ACMI. She is a co-founder of the experimental play collective YomeciPlay and is undertaking a PhD at the Future Play Lab at RMIT University.

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Games as Feminist Artefacts: Towards an Analytical Framework for Game Design

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Keywords

feminist game studies, feminist HCI, intersectionality, game design, representation

INTRODUCTION

This paper asks: How can we read games as feminist artefacts, and what design principles can be extracted to guide feminist game-making practices?

Games are cultural artefacts that encode values not only through narrative but also through mechanics and systems. Bardzell (2010) argues that feminism is a natural ally to interaction design, with its commitments to agency, fulfilment, identity, equity, empowerment, and social justice. Reading games as feminist artefacts allows us to identify how values are encoded and how alternative, feminist practices of design might be cultivated.

Mainstream games frequently reproduce patriarchal, Eurocentric, and heteronormative logics. Patriarchal logics privilege masculine-coded mechanics of domination, conquest, and combat — cycles of violence that mirror militaristic patterns (Mama 2007). Eurocentric tendencies situate play in Western-centric histories, while the Global South is flattened or exoticised (Tamale 2020). Heteronormative defaults centre straight, cisgender, often white male protagonists, relegating women, queer, and trans characters to secondary or stereotypical roles (Shaw 2014).

This paper proposes an analytical framework to read games as feminist artefacts. Drawing from feminist technoscience, decolonial feminism, and feminist HCI, I show how feminist readings of games can go beyond representational diversity and instead attend to mechanics, systems, and situated worlds. The framework is then applied to a set of case studies, generating design insights that can inform feminist game-making practices.

THEORETICAL GROUNDING

Feminist approaches to technology emphasise that design is never neutral. Haraway's 'Situated Knowledges' (1988) highlights that knowledge is partial and embodied; when applied to games, this means analysing whose perspectives are centred and which knowledges are validated. Suchman (2007) frames design as relational and political. Tamale (2020) argues for decolonising feminist knowledge, emphasising collectivity, ecology, and cultural situatedness.

Bardzell's (2010) principles of pluralism through multiple cultural perspectives; advocacy through centring marginalised voices; ecology through representing interdependence with environments resonate with Flanagan's *Critical Play* (2009), which frames games as sites of resistance, and with Shaw's *Gaming at the Edge* (2014), which argues that representation matters not simply in terms of presence but in how identities are situated and made playable.

Intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) further clarifies how race, gender, and geography shape games' cultural work. In Nakamura and Gray's work, this is further extended to digital games, showing how race, culture, and gender intersect in representation and play. Together, these perspectives push us beyond concepts such as female protagonists towards systemic feminist analysis.

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

To guide this analysis, I draw conceptually from the MDA framework (Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek 2004), which distinguishes between Mechanics, Dynamics and Aesthetics. The paper employs close:

- Narrative: representation of adolescence, girlhood, motherhood, community.
- Mechanics and dynamics: caregiving, ecological repair, interdependence.
- Aesthetics and Worldbuilding: situated geographies resisting Eurocentric norms.

Inclusion criteria emphasise games situated in non-dominant geographies, centring community and ecological concerns, and resisting masculinist play logics. While casual games often employ feminised mechanics of care and repetition, they are excluded here due to limited thematic or narrative depth for feminist close reading.

CASE STUDIES

The framework is applied to three primary case studies:

- *Mutazione* (Die Gute Fabrik 2019): a coming-of-age story centred on ecology and intergenerational healing.
- *Never Alone* (Upper One Games 2014): an Iñupiat girl and fox embody Indigenous storytelling and dual-character interdependence.
- *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus 2020): caregiving mechanics transform death into a relational, emotional process.

Secondary comparisons include *Tchia* (Awaceb 2023) and *Alba: A Wildlife Adventure* (ustwo games 2020).

Across these games, feminist potentials emerge through ecology, care, adolescence, and culturally situated worlds.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates how games can be read as feminist artefacts through attention to narrative, mechanics, and worldbuilding. Case studies reveal shared characteristics such as care as mechanic, ecology as narrative driver, girlhood as site of resistance, and situated geographies.

At the same time, the emphasis on care requires caution. While care can resist masculinist logics of conquest, it may also reproduce patriarchal norms that confine women and girls to nurturing roles. Feminist game design must therefore ask whose labour is represented, how it is valued, and whether other mechanics such as collective resistance or intergenerational solidarity can expand beyond care.

The contribution is twofold: first, an analytical framework for feminist game studies; second, design insights for feminist game-making, including participatory storytelling, care-centred mechanics, and culturally situated aesthetics. Future work will develop this framework into a practical methodology for feminist game design and apply it in my own practice, including the development of Kamata.

BIO

Neema Iyer is a game designer, researcher, and founder of STEMto Studio. She is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney, researching gendered gaming experiences and feminist game design. Her practice-led research integrates feminist theory, digital rights, and creative game-making, with projects including Kamata, Digital SafeTea, and Choose Your Own Fake News.

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Gendered Arenas: Understanding Esports and Videogame Participation Under Sports Infrastructure

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Keywords

videogames, esports, sports, infrastructure, sociology, gender, LGBTQIA+, ethnography

INTRODUCTION

Esports and gaming events are being hosted in existing sports stadium infrastructure, resulting in inaccessible esports productions and gendered experiences. Sports stadiums and arenas are sterile spaces, that have been cultivated by masculine and high socioeconomic class (Silk, 2004). When a culture and sporting-form such as esports, is activated by existing topophilia, meaning, a strong sense of place that holds a specific cultural identity (Witkowski, 2013). The intersection of games and traditional sports has created environments, that hold sterile and inaccessible attributes to its physical and sociocultural structure, affecting those present in the space (Silk, 2004; Star, 1990; Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2013).

Ethnographic research on esports and sportification of games, has been addressed by experts including TL Taylor and Emma Witkowski addressing sporting culture and masculinities in the space of esports (Taylor, 2012; Witkowski 2013). Despite the significant uptake of esports under sports influence, this paper addresses participants experiences at videogame and esports events, under sports infrastructure. This paper builds upon current ethnographic research, exploring esports events using infrastructure studies, gender theory and sociological concepts.

An ethnographic case study on DREAMHACK Melbourne 2024, was conducted using semi-structured interviews and observations, revealing the connection of esports to sports worlds. Fieldwork conducted across the three-day videogame and esports event, at Rod Laver Arena, included observing and conducting non-invasive documentation of material and presentations at the event e.g. demographics, clothing choices- esports and sports uniforms-, game area activations and activities. This paper overviews a small sample of the ethnographic data collected from this case study. Thematic analysis was used to extrapolate codes and themes from the interviews conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Previous research has noted how the construction of identity production in these spaces formulates experiences, especially through femininity in esports, as participants may feel limited and intimidated by the communities that have been formed by masculinity and male experiences (Witkowski, 2018).

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Gendered experiences in esports are quite common, and further research is in order to understand the historical impact the masculine identity in gaming and esports culture, whilst exploring the implications and relationality regarding women and gender diverse participants in these spaces (Halberstam, 2018; Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2013; Witkowski, 2018). Esports is at a critical moment for women in the gaming community, though we are seeing prosperous data of increased involvement of women around these events.

Videogames and esports success are commended both for its economic and social impact, yet the construction of masculinity and gendered expectations have built and determined existing esports and videogame culture as we know it. An inclusive space was present at the event, that was suitable for those seeking a reprieve from the overstimulation of sound, lights and humans. Immersive esports and gaming spaces were present in the activations sector of the event, which did however cater to specific audiences creating gendered spaces. As the sports infrastructure provides recognition to the activity of esports and validation to the public and mainstream media, accessibility issues for participants remained a topic of discussion.

Videogames have gained popularity as a form of entertainment, engaging with interactive worlds and narratives that traditional media could not offer (Kocurek, 2015). Funding research to promote esports and gaming sustainably, can empower esports to ensure ethical and inclusive practices, are developed long term and can create a positive esports sector in Victoria. Integrating esports into education has become a recent popular incentive for schools and institutions. From this paper, I encouraged further research to be conducted, to explore the affordances and experiences that sports stadiums have on esports and gaming communities, specifically how representation for women and gender diverse people can be encouraged.

In hopes to reclaim queerness as a fundamental part of research in esports, I hope to extrapolate these findings in my PhD research, focussing on women and gender diverse students' participation in videogame and esports programs in high school.

BIO

Chrysanthe Lontis is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of Media and Communications at RMIT University. Their PhD research is focusing on esports and videogame cultures, specifically on women and gender diverse student participation in high school esports programs. Chrysanthe is currently an Esports Production Assistant with the Australian Esports League. Chrysanthe is also a Game Designer, specialised in sound design and production.

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Interface Games as Microgenre: Definition and Thematic Investigation

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Keywords

Interface; itch.io; genre; microgenre; videogame; surveillance

INTRODUCTION

Digital user interfaces are central to everyday life in contemporary capitalism. Laptops, phones, tablets and television screens all have user interfaces, and they are the main way many of us work, watch, read, socialise and play (Ash 2015, Galloway 2012, Hansen 2012, Jorgensen 2013). It is unsurprising, then, that there has been a recent spate of games that foreground user interfaces as central to everyday life. Remediating user interfaces, often from non-games software (Bolter and Grusin 2000), these games turn fictional computers and phones into playful environments, as players send emails, trawl through files, use software, and hack systems to play. They use what Krampe et al. (2024) refer to as “metareferential interfaces”, or “interfaces about interfaces” (739), to self-reflexively highlight the centrality of user interfaces to digital software and videogames in general. While there are examples in the literature discussing these games individually (e.g. Nicoll 2024, Bakk 2021, Wood 2017), there has been no substantive attempt to outline how remediating interfaces create meaning and play across all these games, often in ways that signal directly towards the situatedness of user interfaces within contemporary capitalism.

In this paper, we offer one of the first attempts to define and theorise these games as an emerging genre—or “microgenre” (Rehak 2007, Stevens and O’Donnell 2020)—we call the “interface game”. As we will show, interface games are a diverse microgenre that refer to a wide variety of themes, and which comment on our relationship to user interfaces. In our research, we have identified more than fifty interface games, with well-known examples including *Her Story* (Sam Barlow 2015), *Telling Lies* (Sam Barlow 2019) *Emily is Away* (Kyle Seeley 2015) and *Hypnospace Outlaw* (Tendershoot 2019). Beyond these examples, there are many that exist on the periphery of the games industry (Keogh 2023), created by solo developers and distributed on the independent games platform itch.io, as it is a significant emerging genre in hobbyist and independent games design.

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Discussing both the larger and niche examples, this paper will define interface games as a microgenre. Microgenre refers to “the classification of increasingly niche-marketed worlds in popular music, fiction, television and the internet” (Stevens and O’Donnell 2020, 1) that have proliferated through digital platforms. Examining microgenres allows us to make “micro-connections among cultural artifacts” (Stevens and O’Donnell 2020, 1), creating nuance in discussions about culture by unravelling the smaller, under-examined trends in media production. Via Frow’s (2006) theorisation of “generic cues”—ways of implicating a genre or way of reading that is immanent to the text’s form—we outline the formal features of the microgenre and show how interface games are uniquely suited to consider the socio-political nature of user interfaces (Galloway, 2012). In doing so, we forward the importance of generic analysis in games studies, as well as the usefulness of examining under-examined and hyper-niche game genres.

We use this generic analysis to highlight four thematic preoccupations in the games we identified: surveillance, nostalgia, digital identity and digital horror. The first theme, surveillance, includes games like *Her Story* and *The Operator* (Bureau 81 2024) that force the player to confront the surveillance that occurs through the user interface, as well as the labour that underpins it. The second theme, nostalgia, utilises imaginary software and hardware in games like *Hypnospace Outlaw* and *Moida Mansion* (Lucas Pope 2024) to both nostalgically invoke early computer histories, while challenging conventional historical narratives around perpetual technological progression. The third theme involves the interrogation of digital identities—especially by queer developers—through games like *Secret Little Haven* (Hummingwarp Interactive 2018) and *A Normal Lost Phone* (Accidental Queens 2017), which consider how our social lives and identity-formation are mediated through user interfaces. Finally, the fourth theme of digital horror involves games like *Pony Island* (Daniel Mullins Games 2016) and *Basilisk 2000* (KIRA 2023), and considers the uncanny underpinnings of interfaces, and the darkness lurking beneath the screen.

Each of these preoccupations identify interface games as a microgenre uniquely suited to interrogating the role of interfaces in our daily life. Through their design, interface games are one of the main ludic spaces for considering the impact that user interfaces and platforms have on our identities, experiences and labour, and their increasing embeddedness in our daily lives. Through this analysis, this paper not only charts a crucial new microgenre, but stresses the importance for looking towards microgenres on platforms like itch.io as places of formal experimentation within games.

BIO

Dr Cassandra Barkman is a lecturer in Media & Communications at the University of Melbourne. Her research regards the close textual analysis of videogames, narratology, complex storytelling and pedagogy. She is also a board member for DiGRA Australia and deputy director of University of Melbourne research initiative MAGPIE (Melbourne Academic Games, Play and Interactive Entertainment).

Finn Dawson is a PhD Candidate at the University of Sydney. He writes on world-building and politics in digital games, analysing how game worlds are related to contemporary capitalism. He has spoken and written on automation, world-building and game communities.

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IP Production and the Capitalist Logic of Games World-building

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Keywords

Capitalism, World-building, Intellectual Property, Marxism, Videogames

INTRODUCTION

World-building is a term that is used widely throughout games production and analysis with few critical attempts to understand it. While there have been some recent important works that have considered games world-building from a historical (Kocurek and Payne 2024) and textual (Ruberg 2025) perspective, its relationship to capitalism is mostly unexplored. Building off the work of various theorists of world-building (Ekman and Taylor 2016; Hassler-Forest 2016) this paper forwards a theory of games world-building that emphasises the embeddedness of game worlds in capitalism. Through analysing the political-economic construction of the game worlds of the *Fallout* franchise (1988–present) and *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM 2019), I argue that world-building is not just a form of creative production but an important part in the development and prolonging of Intellectual Property (IP). World-building is the creation of what Marx (1992) defined as “fixed capital”. For Marx, fixed capital is the portion of capital that remains fixed within the production process, only giving up a part of its value in production, in contrast to “circulating capital”, which is “completely consumed in every labour process” (p. 238). Examples of fixed capital include machines and farm animals, although perhaps the most useful metaphor for understanding game worlds is land, as franchising, legal infrastructure and the creation of IP turns the player’s relationship to the world closer to that of a rentier than a consumer (Srnicek 2021). Through outlining this relationship, I present a novel way of understanding the essential socio-economic nature of game worlds.

I then turn to how this affects the aesthetics of games. Building off the work of Fredric Jameson (1991) and Anna Kornbluh (2024), I argue that this political-economic relationship leads to a form of fictional world-production that lacks any sense of historicity or change. If game worlds are a store of “dead labour” (Marx 1990, p. 342), it is against the capitalist’s interest to make any substantial changes to the world, as this would be a waste of the value embedded within it. Through a brief analysis of the *Fallout* franchise, I argue that this economic relationship means big-budget game worlds tend towards stasis: endless, ever-present and always-on worlds that exist without any meaningful change. Even further, this stasis expresses the “political unconscious” (Jameson 2013) of what Anna Kornbluh (2024) calls “too-late” capitalism—a society where history has ended and the future feels increasingly foreclosed. The fixed nature of these worlds makes it harder for us to envision radical changes to the world in which we live: an aesthetic expression of “capitalist realism” (Fisher 2009), the belief—to quote Thatcher—that there “there is no alternative”.

Finally, I look towards a game which resists this tendency towards stasis through a deep embedding of historicity into the gameworld: ZA/UM’s 2019 role-

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playing game *Disco Elysium*. Instead of a static world, I argue that the game presents the narrative period as only a single moment in a much larger process of historical change, destabilising the importance of the game’s specific historical moment. I argue that *Disco Elysium* game forwards a model of historical, process-based world-building that recognizes the importance of not just the people and places that currently exist, but those in the past and the things yet to come. I finish by showing how *Disco Elysium* still succumbed to its nature as fixed capital, through a very brief discussion of the legal-financial battle over the *Elysium* IP (People Make Games 2023). I show how even those works that push against world-building’s nature as fixed capital production are still often subsumed into it due to the overwhelming elasticity of capitalist logics of world-building.

Across these examinations, my paper expresses the need for a critical understanding of world-building within games and media studies. If, as Ruberg (2025) suggests, all games are just worlds—and thus all games-production is really a form of world-building—then it is crucial that world-building as both a practice and rhetorical construct is better understood from textual, philosophical, historical and political-economic perspectives. Understanding worlds is necessary for understanding games, and this paper is an important and novel contribution for better understanding the economics and ideologies that guide late capitalist games production, a necessary step to understanding a way out. In doing so, this paper suggests how we can reclaim world-building as a radical utopian practice, what Zigon (2017) calls an “experimentation with an otherwise” (para 9).

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BIO

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Ludocharacter Resonance: Documenting Queer Play Strategies in Tabletop Role-Playing Games

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Keywords

tabletop role-playing games, dungeons & dragons, queerness, queer play, ludonarrative dissonance, character

INTRODUCTION

Research on tabletop role-playing games (TTRPG/s) is a relatively small area of wider game studies literature given the recent widespread popularity of titles such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (5th Edition, Wizards of the Coast 2014). Even smaller still is the intersection of TTRPG research with lenses such as queerness; while some scholarship has illuminated issues of queer and intersectional representation in TTRPGs,¹ as TTRPG designer Avery Alder (2013) posits, “we need to queer more than just the cover art in order to be talking about queer games.” This sentiment similarly applies to research around TTRPGs: queerness is not merely (nor often) found in the pages of sourcebooks, but in the action of play that breathes life into them.

Shaw & Ruberg’s paradigm of queer game studies (2017) encapsulates this understanding, yet is primarily focused on the application of queer theory, intersectional lenses, and the action of queering play to video game scholarship. I have argued this thinking can also more broadly be applied to TTRPG research (Morris 2024) to analyse how players queer TTRPGs through play, with a particular focus on character design and role-play. While a variety of documented methods of queering video and digital games exists,² there are no studies that document specific queer play methods (which I have termed *queer play strategies*) in TTRPG play. This is a relatively novel approach to TTRPG research,³ where recent focus has placed emphasis on queerness in game design.⁴

The aim of the present study is to document and identify ways which queer players transform TTRPG play through various queer play strategies. This is part of my ongoing PhD research, which is concerned with examining how the action of queering might transform TTRPG play and players. Informed by the paradigm of queer game studies (Shaw & Ruberg 2017) and a hybrid theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969; Mead 1934) and Butlerian performativity theory (Butler 1993), this study was a narrow but necessarily deep exploration into

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how a player engaged in queer play over a sustained period. Using queer and qualitative autoethnographic methods (Jones & Adams 2010), the transformative fixed and fluid understandings of the reflexive self produced as part of the research (Boll 2024; Chang 2008; Custer 2014) were embraced to better understand how queer play could be transformative of not only the play experience, but players themselves. Autoethnographic data was collected from February 2024 to July 2025 from a weekly *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign I played in through a mixture of field notes, various transcripts, and memos. The data was then analysed using Critical Thematic Analysis methods (Lawless & Chen 2018) and interdisciplinary lenses including queer theory, feminist studies, masculinity studies, crip theory, and media studies to identify relevant queer play strategies. In a subsequent study, these findings were discussed with other players from the same campaign through semi-structured interviews to confirm and further findings.

The results showed that a wide range of queer play strategies could be identified from sustained long-term TTRPG play. Some of these linked clearly to existing queer play methods in video game-centric queer game studies, such as ‘playing to lose’ or ‘playing for the purposes of no fun’ (Ruberg 2015, 2019). However a large range of novel queer play strategies were also identified, ranging from ‘leaning into vocal and/or symbolic dissonance during play’ to ‘developing queer ethics of care beyond violence and heroism.’ Importantly, intersectional queer play strategies were also identified, such as ‘queer crip play’ and ‘playing to heal,’ both of which were used to explore ways in which disability could be experienced and felt bodily in TTRPG play experiences.

A major theme identified across these strategies was the novel concept of *ludocharacter resonance*. Drawing from the well-known concept of ludonarrative dissonance (Hocking 2007), which describes the disruptive phenomena in video games when the mechanics and narrative clash dissonantly and may disrupt the overall experience, ludocharacter resonance can be applied more broadly to any character-based game. Ludocharacter resonance occurs when the build and mechanics of the character (such as ability scores or class features in a *Dungeons & Dragons* context) reinforce the backstory and personality of the character, and vice versa. By leaning into ludocharacter resonance, which might utilise queer play strategies like designing a character to fail, authentic and engaging characters can be created and played that can be related to around the table resulting in a transformative play experience, as findings demonstrate. This is one example of a major contribution from this study. Other contributions include the cataloguing of a wide range of novel TTRPG-focused queer play strategies and the rich theoretical language used to describe them. Ideally, this research should encourage further exploration into intersectional queer play strategies identified in TTRPG play, and the transformative potential of such.

BIO

Emily Morris (she/they) is a queer designer, Teaching Fellow, tutor, and full-time PhD Candidate at Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington’s Te Kura Hoahoa—School of Design in Aotearoa New Zealand. Their academic interests are interdisciplinary, highlighting queer theory, feminist studies, (tabletop role-playing) game design, play, visual narratives, fan studies, crip theory, and transformative works, alongside design studies more broadly. Her upcoming games can be found at [Splice of Life Games](#), and her academic blog can be found at [Queer TTRPG Studies](#).

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ENDNOTES

1 See: Carter 2022; Sihvonen & Stenros 2018; Stenros & Sihvonen 2015.

2 See: Chang 2015, 2017; Galloway 2006; Halberstam 2017; Juul in Ruberg & Shaw 2017; Lauteria 2012; Ruberg 2015, 2018, 2019; Sundén 2009.

3 Sihvonen & Stenros (2019a) have elsewhere discussed the role of queering play in role-playing games (RPG/s) but are primarily interested in queer play “produced in game spaces through game design and player action” (116). My research is less concerned with how RPG design may/may not facilitate queer play, but rather how players queer TTRPG play themselves through a combination of mechanic-based and role-play actions rooted in character performance.

4 See: Alder & St Patrick 2013; Berge 2021; Morris 2022; Sihvonen & Stenros 2019b.

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Australian Game Live Streamers and Viewers on Twitch

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Keywords

Twitch, live streaming, Australia, community, culture, attitude

ABSTRACT

When a user financially supports the Twitch channel we're currently watching, a small video clip pops up in the corner of the streamer's broadcast. It is a short excerpt from a famous advert for the so-called "Lube Mobile", an Australian mechanic and repair service that comes to your home. The service's catchy tune and name that begs for double entendre have combined to make it an unintended source of humour amongst young Australians. In the channel's accompanying textual "chat" window, meanwhile, the subscriber icons - for viewers who financially support the stream - all represent well-known Australian foods and snacks. The custom "emotes" in this channel - Twitch's term for "emojis", small artistic representations of faces or other graphics - also exhibit a distinctly Australian flavour, with endearing purple koalas in a variety of poses (smirking, carrying a heart, crying, and so forth). Also included is a graphical representation of the letters "OH NOR", representing a supposedly Australian pronunciation of "oh no". Watching the channel it becomes clear that in this live stream such Australian identity markers occupy an interesting dual role - they simultaneously explicitly mark the channel out as being "Australian", but they also allow the streamer to reflect with seemingly genuine amusement on noteworthy, archetypal or idiosyncratic elements of Australian culture and history.

Many streamers reveal their country of origin and facilitate discussions about national cultures and differences with their viewers - yet beyond a few studies (e.g. Montardo et al., 2017; Sixto-García & Losada-Fernández, 2023) national or cultural distinctions or identities in game live streaming practices and experiences have yet to be studied in much detail. This is most likely due to the implicit and assumed "American-ness" of the quotidian live streamer on Twitch (Taylor, 2018; Ruberg, 2021; Johnson, 2024) - itself an American company. Yet what makes live streaming so distinctive is the ability for anyone, from almost any country, to develop something akin to a personalised television channel, and broadcast its material globally. Hjorth and Chan (2009:11) stress the value in studying "regional-specific forms of media literacy, creativity, intimacy and labor", and there is thus potentially significant value in

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understanding and addressing these in the live streaming context. Scholarship on live streaming is dominated by the North American context, and to a lesser extent the mainland Chinese context, and so studies of other nationalities – their broadcasters, viewers, communities, cultures, and everything else – will show us key counter-currents on these sites and their users, as well as the global perceptions of the nationalities and cultures building digital fame and digital sociality on such platforms. Given this context, how, then, are Australian live streamers faring on Twitch, and who is watching them?

This paper seeks to answer these questions. Specifically, it offers a first study of the motivations and interests of Twitch viewers - both from Australia and abroad - who watch live streamers from Australia. After a brief review of current research directions in digital Australian gaming and live streaming, we relate our methodology, which involved distributing a survey to 779 viewers of Australian live streamers. From this data our discussion then has three parts. Firstly, we explore the central role of community in the attraction of Australian live streamers, showing that Australian viewers appreciate the opportunity to forge social connections with their compatriots, while non-Australian viewers find Australian Twitch communities to be no different from any others. This demonstrates clearly for the first time that nationally-specific Twitch streams can offer (or fail to offer) different rewards to users - even those who share a language - depending on their national backgrounds. Secondly, we discuss live streaming channel culture, showing that both Australians and non-Australians are strongly drawn to the cultural elements of Australian live streaming. Unlike the community discussion, this finding demonstrates that nationally-distinct parts of a Twitch channel can also offer the same thing to viewers, irrespective of their national background - but that this is still contingent on a strongly-presented national identity. Thirdly, we turn from culture to attitude, and note again how viewers both domestic and abroad expressed a strong appreciation for the attitude of Australian live streamers, often emphasising their humour, their authenticity, and how unlike other live streamers they are perceived as being. Here we delve more deeply into the norms of live streaming and live streamers, showing how the Australian live streamer appears a novel and distinct type of broadcaster who stands in some ways alongside, but in some ways very far away from, live streaming norms. Overall our paper thus demonstrates that nationality, and the presentation and articulation of that nationality, are vital elements in Twitch streaming which have rarely seen much attention. We also shed light for the first time on Australian live streamers, and Australian live streaming viewers, neither of which have been studied before.

BIO

Dr Mark R Johnson is a Senior Lecturer in Digital Cultures in the Department of Media and Communications at the University of Sydney. His research focuses on Twitch.tv and game live streaming, as well as esports, game production and consumption, and gamblification in digital games. He has published in journals such as “Information, Communication and Society”, “Media, Culture and Society”, “Games and Culture”, and “Convergence”. Outside of academia he is also an independent game developer best known for the roguelike “Ultima Ratio Regum”, and a regular games blogger, podcaster, and commentator.

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Nothing Beyond the Sea: Facing the Videogame Void

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Keywords

Space, aesthetics, invisible walls, psychoanalysis, void, desire, finitude

INTRODUCTION

Environments made in 3D engines straddle an 'out of bounds' or void space that is an unavoidable byproduct of Cartesian coordinates. This void is sublime in Lyotard's (1991) sense: it is a 'here' devoid of representation (84), a 'there is' saturated in unactualised potential (88), here, code. It is the presence of nothing, and it points to the fact that there could be something more, but there isn't. In this paper we investigate the way that our relationship to the computational void is mediated by the finitude of invisible walls in videogames. We argue that players desire the infinity of the void, and that this desire is stoked through its being veiled rather than in attempts to fill or represent it.

What we refer to as 'invisible walls' are decorated façades delimiting player movement; our relationship to these walls is a matter of aesthetics. Less an investigation into artistic categories, aesthetics probes the way subjects are formed by their milieu, and how artistic texts are used to make sense of subjective finitude (Ashfield and de Bolla 1996; Shinkle 2012). Twenty-first century aesthetics concerns subjects faced with an industrial drive to computational infinity (Gilbert-Rolfe, 112), and map more-than-human entanglements (Lee-Morrison 2023; May and Wilde 2024). Recent attempts to domesticate the void have resulted in the elimination of human desire and subsequent finitisation of the infinite, as Paolo Ruffino (2024) discovers in *No Man's Sky's* (Hello Games 2016) inhuman aesthetics. Videogames announcing their finitude to the human subject inaugurate a very different relationship to the void. Alfie Bown (2017) writes that players inhabit virtual worlds aware that "there is nothing beyond the sea" while still yet believing in the beyond (107), and Brendan Keogh (2018) argues in actively making sense of games' spatial incongruities "The player makes the world" (53). We ask how spatial discontinuity implicates us in the imaginative generation of the world, and the role of the finite object in preserving the void's sense of the infinite.

We turn to art criticism and Lacanian game studies to investigate this, focussing on the invisible walls of 3D platformer compilations *Spyro Reignited Trilogy* (Toys for Bob, 2018) and *Crash Bandicoot N. Sane Trilogy* (Vicarious Visions, 2017). Michael

Fried (1990) writes that we become aware of looking at a painting when two-dimensional and illusionistic space are made to coincide (11). These “noncommunicating axes” (11) produce “a direct address to the beholder” called “facingness,” that at once beckons and rebukes us (1996, 196). In the way of psychoanalysis, Benjamin Nicoll (2022) argues that player desire produces a “gaze” in the visual field of the game, which is an absence we consciously intend to domesticate or overcome through play, and unconsciously hope to fail at (545). Nicoll proposes that when a text reveals its internal lack, it looks back at us (545), making us aware that we’re “culpable” in the play of desire (547). Finally T.J. Clark (2018) argues that two-dimensional planes in illusionistic space at once reveal the finitude of the picture plane, and indicate the presence of the unrepresentable in what’s before us (55).

The synthesis of art criticism and psychoanalysis allows us to see how the subject is implicated in the construction of gamespace, make-believing spatial extension through planar incongruity. When the internal lack of the text is disclosed (here the unassailable void), the subject becomes aware of their own lack, and the inability of the text to absolve them of it. We find here a model of desire that mirrors the computational void. Mari Ruti (2012) claims what we desire is always *beyond* the object, and that all desire is directed at the sublime Thing: an imaginary lost object that can only be represented through emptiness (129). It’s “the abyssal void of subjectivity itself” (Nicoll, 536), infinite as its computational counterpart, exceeding every attempt to fill it. We can see then how invisible walls in their very decoration foster rather than extinguish desire, and point us to an infinite ‘beyond the sea’ that is paradoxically already here.

An aesthetics of the void centres on the appreciation of finitude. The appearance of decorated walls in videogames induces a theatrical rendering of space, in which the void remains a site of desire, and the finitude of the here-and-now the means by which we must access it. These walls mediate our relationship to computational infinity by veiling it, giving us parts to play in a ruse through which we become active participants in the construction of a world as lacking as we are. Demand for bigger videogames dictates we build computers capable of programming into and annexing the void, but this is built on an impossibility that defers joy and the void’s horizon. The pleasure of videogames lies not in expansion, but in the finitude that stokes desire for that which is beyond the sea.

BIO

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NPCs as performers of community testimony: using Unity game engine for social simulation in *Habit Habit* (2022)

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Figure 1. Still, cropped aspect ratio, from *Habit Habit* (2022) by Kalanjay Dhir.

Keywords

NPCs, Unity game engine, simulation, public art, data visualisation, new media art

INTRODUCTION

In game design research and literature, discussion of non-player characters (referred to as NPCs) prioritise questions of believability and ever-increasing human-like realism (Ruberg 2022; Warpefelt 2016; Aydin et al. 2023). NPCs are understood as

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digital characters that exist *for* a player, serving to enrich or enable narrative and playful experiences (Poivet et al. 2025) in a “player-centred approach” (Pretty et al. 2024, 3052).

To demonstrate how Unity as a game engine shapes this ideology, we will present a reflective case study of *Habit Habit* (2022) by Kalanjay Dhir, a public artwork commissioned by City of Parramatta Council, located on Dharug land in Sydney, Australia. *Habit Habit* is a 3-part video series that shows a non-playable but game-like simulated Parramatta in the year 2922, populated by 21 local citizens who roam the space and converse with each other.

This paper will focus on the character design and implementation process undertaken by myself as technical lead in collaboration with the artist. Each character is a real local citizen from Parramatta, with whom the artist conducted an interview and collaborative avatar design session using the avatar design tool *VRoid Studio* (2018). Once given a pseudonym by the interview subject, each plant-human hybrid avatar was placed in a Unity environment, given animations, AI navigation paths, and custom scripts that enable them to converse with other avatars. Their conversations reproduce curated extracts from the interview textual data, discussing their relationship to Parramatta, their engagement with digital technologies, and their views on change.

During the process of implementing these characters, we found that Unity easily facilitated NPC construction. AI navigation with NavMeshes and Agents, animation trees, dialogue systems, and text display are all crucial to the effectiveness of *Habit Habit* as a piece of data visualisation that shares interview data in a novel and compelling way. However, the technical ease of these systems also led to a reproduction of genre norms associated with NPCs, with characters following pre-defined paths and being piloted by code that strictly defines their actions. This went against our original aim of enabling each character to be an independent entity with relative freedom, hoping to, via rules of conversation and social engagement, architect emergence (Wang and Qi 2021). Our redirection towards a more structured implementation is an example of how Unity as a piece of cultural software (Nicoll and Keogh 2019) shapes the decisions of creatives, in what Consalvo and Staines call “game engine thinking” (2021, 764).



Figure 2. Still, original aspect ratio, from *Habit Habit* (2022) by Kalanjay Dhir.

While our characters ended up as constrained entities rather than the independent agents we originally aimed for, we found that our emphasis on reproducing textual data from interviews — the simple fact of digital characters speaking words that were first spoken by real people in conversation — was a particularly effective strategy to evoke personhood. If you watch for long enough, the repetitive, programmatic loops that govern each character become clear. However, as the text bubbles pop up above

each character, the words they contain make it obvious that there is a subjectivity—a voice, a real person somewhere else—re-emerging from afar. *Habit Habit* therefore makes apparent Paul Scriven’s argument that NPCs are a “mediated co-performance” by a team of creatives (2023, 244). In *Habit Habit*, it is the interview subject who is the primary performer, mediated by the complex network of collaborating humans and digital technologies—including Unity—that manifest the *Habit Habit* landscape.

Habit Habit is a game-like environment with no player. Therefore, while the characters fulfil the NPC functionality of “dispens[ing] lore” (Warpefelt 2016, 39), there is no player that they dispense this *to*; instead they share lore with one another, irrelevant of whether there is any human audience to observe it happening. While their agency may be constrained within the system, the characters of *Habit Habit* nevertheless exist in their digital world not to enrich or augment the experience of any individual player, but for the performance of themselves.



Figure 3. *Habit Habit* (2022) by Kalanjay Dhir playing on the lobby screen of PHIVE.

The characters of *Habit Habit* do not fulfil the expected narrative and ludic roles of NPCs, and are not quite players, either. Examining the design process of *Habit Habit* therefore locates key strategies for working against the conventions of NPCs that Unity directs designers towards. The inclusion of real world textual data challenges the concept that NPCs exist in service of the narrative and ludic enjoyment of a player. Instead, the characters of *Habit Habit* are digital entities that perform real testimony from Parramatta citizens as a matter of public record, as a form of data visualisation, and to speculate upon the future of Parramatta as a civic space of shared discussion and community.

BIO

Alexandra Chalmers Braithwaite is a design researcher and practitioner who recently completed their doctoral studies at the University of Technology Sydney. Their work

explores experiences of embodiment in virtual environments, with a focus on how queer and cyberfeminist approaches can be incorporated into design practices in this realm. As part of their research, Alexandra produced the Body Traces Archive (2024), a VR experience of queer embodiment. In addition, Alexandra has collaborated on new media & digital artworks with local artists Kalanjay Dhir, Fei Guo, Sidney McMahon, Andrew Burrell and Agatha Gothe-Snape.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The work *Habit Habit* (2022) by Kalanjay Dhir was commissioned by the City of Parramatta. The work was produced in collaboration by Kalanjay Dhir, Alexandra Chalmers Braithwaite, Emma Uyen-Le Pham, Amy Toma, Kashif Sheikh and Chi Tran.

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Observing Indie Game Devs on Discord: The Scroll-Up Method

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Keywords

Discord, videogame development, labour, community, scroll-up method

INTRODUCTION

“Community platforms” (Greentree, 2025) like Discord, Slack, and to a lesser extent Microsoft Teams, are now so central to contemporary game production as to be mundane. Like much of contemporary creative work, videogame development is increasingly undertaken by small, informal, and geographically dispersed teams. Particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic (Foxman et al., 2024), game developers take advantage of these highly configurable communication platforms to operate asynchronous, remote, and highly collaborative workspaces and communities. Significantly, each of the three major platforms, central to both game development and much of contemporary digital work, either emerged directly from the game sector or were inspired by it. Game development in turn has become the sector *par excellence* for understanding the shape of these platforms in contemporary work and creative practice. These community-communication platforms are highly diffuse and private, which creates new challenges for researchers looking to understand the contours of digital work. However, they also provide new opportunities for researchers in gaining insights to the creative and collaborative processes of digital workers generally and game developers specifically.

This paper details a new qualitative method for studying game production: the scroll-up observation method. As part of a larger project, we developed and deployed this method to highlight how creative work has been transformed to become interoperable with, exploitative of, and dependent on these popular and mundane community-communication platforms. With a specific focus on the structures of independent game development teams on Discord, we make the case for the usefulness of the scroll-up method in understanding how creative practice in game development work functions and surfaces via community platforms.

Observation-style methods have been employed in game production studies to great effect (Banks, 2013; O’Donnell, 2014). These approaches, however, are generally limited to time- and resource-intensive in-person sessions. At the same time, game production studies scholars have argued that game development has always been

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platformised (Chia, et al., 2020; Nieborg & Poell, 2018). The community platforms that are now central to the game production process provide a relatively resource-light alternative to in-person observations as well as an opportunity to witness the increasingly distributed and decentralised vectors and contexts in which game development work is now conducted.

Our project was centrally concerned with questions around how ideation, negotiation, interrelations and other aspects of creative work operate in the day-to-day practice of game development teams. We identified Discord servers as a potential site for observing these practices in a feasible way and thus designed the scroll-up observation method. The scroll-up observation is a digital ethnographic method (Taylor, 2006) in which researchers move back through a workplace or community's activity on a community platform in order to better understand that community's practices and experiences. It bears similarities to methods which aim to move through and trace user practices through digital platforms, such as the "scroll back" (Robards & Lincoln, 2017) and "app walkthrough" (Light et al., 2018) methods. However, the scroll-up observation method's differences lie in its interest in practices rather than infrastructures, and the emergent collective practices of a broader group or community (for example, a work team) rather than individuals.

This paper details scroll-up observations conducted on six Discord servers used by Australian-based game development teams. Four of these were conducted on Discord servers as the teams were actively working on developing and releasing their games. A further two were retroactive scroll-up observations of Discords for games which had previously been completed. We collected data in the form of fieldnotes and screenshots taken as we scrolled-up, paying particular attention to key moments in the game development process, interpersonal interactions, and the resolving of both creative and professional tensions.

We recorded porous boundaries that manifest in these Discord servers around who is even 'in' a studio, which are often elucidated via channel structures and activity levels. We also observed a blurring of creative, technical, and personal discussion in these Discords, which manifested in a visible collapse of work activity with personal relationships. The scroll-up method also allowed us to witness the wildly divergent patterns of time across contemporary game production, including the rhythms of asynchronous work activities, the stratified ebbs and flows between periods of delay and rush, and the presence bleed (Gregg, 2011) of personal life and the game development studio as manifested on Discord. Ultimately our development and deployment of this method illustrates a heterogenous formation of game development styles and frameworks as highly iterative, informal, and social, where teams would, as noted via our own fieldnotes, "chat the game into existence".

This presentation will introduce and critique the scroll-up method in the context of our own project. Our findings in the context of contemporary game production research will be detailed in order to then reflect on the advantages, challenges, and shortfalls of this method for researching the new world of decentralised and platform-dependent digital work.

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BIO

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Only a Third Place? Rethinking Gaming Venues through Playable Public Ecologies

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Keywords

internet cafés, game spaces, public play, ecological approach, sociotechnical

INTRODUCTION

Internet cafés, LAN centres, and cybercafés are commonly interpreted through the third place model as informal sites beyond home and work that support sociability and community formation (Oldenburg 1999). I argue that this vocabulary is insufficient for contemporary gaming venues and propose playable public ecologies, which model these spaces as dynamic configurations of infrastructure, affect, regulation, and social rhythms. This conceptual shift builds on scholarship that moves from typological labelling to relational accounts.

One influential strand of research presents internet cafés as liminal spaces at the interface between mainstream culture and its margins, nurturing relaxed sociability and regular patronage (Beavis et al. 2005). Across diverse settings—from Korean PC bangs to European game cafés and Turkish internet cafés—studies portray these venues as valued sites where urban youth socialise, unwind, and occasionally seek refuge, aligning with third-place criteria (Beavis et al. 2005; Chee 2006; Cilesiz 2009; Gajadhar et al. 2009; Jonsson 2010; Jonsson 2012; Lee 2007). Running alongside this, a second strand moves beyond venues' social attributes and emphasises the interplay among technology, spatial design, and social practice. These studies do not rely on the third place framework; instead, they frequently combine it with Foucault's heterotopia, micro-level perspectives on sociotechnical shaping, or macro-level urban sociology. This analytical orientation, which treats internet cafés as sociotechnical spaces, was articulated collectively in the 2003 *New Media & Society* special issue on cybercafés through investigations across Commonwealth and European contexts (Lægran and Stewart 2003; Liff and Lægran 2003; Liff and Stewart 2003), and it has been extended and enriched globally over the subsequent decade and beyond (López-Bonilla et al. 2016; Puel and Fernandez 2012; Qiu 2013).

Scholarship on gaming venues in China has emphasised the influence of state regulation and public discourse (Qiu and Zhou 2005; Shao 2010; Zhang 2016). Regulatory instruments—licensing regimes, youth access restrictions, and intermittent crackdowns—have shaped internet cafés over three decades of urban transformation (Wei and Chen 2015). At the same time, official and media narratives have framed cafés as sites of youth “internet addiction”, deviance, and crime, legitimating intensified oversight (Qiu et al. 2009; Szablewicz 2020). In response, ethnographic studies trace competing pressures inside venues and the everyday negotiations with regulatory constraints and moral discourses (Lindtner and Szablewicz 2010; Liu 2009). Player groups and local cafés develop situated norms,

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workarounds, and small collectives which, alongside state regulation, jointly produce the meaning of public play (Lindtner and Dourish 2011).

Taken together, these threads illuminate different parts of the puzzle; considered separately, however, they do not fully clarify the mechanisms at work. Third place theory accounts for routine conviviality yet overlooks material and legal constraints. Sociotechnical analyses offer a more comprehensive account of how layout, device classes, bandwidth, pricing, staffing, and local scripts organise participation, yet, like studies focused on China, they downplay the sensory and rhythmic dimensions of gameplay itself (Jonsson and Verhagen 2011a, 2011b). An ecological model integrates these planes by treating venues as relations among infrastructure, rules and pricing, temporal rhythms, and affect/atmosphere rather than as fixed place types (Apperley 2011; Lindtner et al. 2008). Read this way, the framework explains the fragmentation and fluidity of venue ecologies, linking embodied, socially authored play to classed and identity-marked distinctions and to the broader leisure geographies of communities and cities.

Building on these insights, this study proposes playable public ecologies shaped by four interacting dimensions: Material infrastructures (hardware, software, bandwidth, furniture, spatial layout, and location) interact with affective atmospheres (feelings of excitement or comfort in the room, the immersion produced by lighting and sound, and experiences of freedom or community belonging). These elements are further conditioned by regulatory and economic factors (state policies on access and content, age restrictions, commercial licensing, and market competition) and are expressed in social patterns (who gathers there, how norms and friendships form, and which activities are prioritised). This conceptual article synthesises more than thirty studies on the cultures and functions of internet cafés and draws on spatial theory, including rhythm analysis of temporal practices and co-present rhythms, as well as affordance-centred accounts of layout and atmosphere (Apperley 2011; Sjöblom 2011). The framework offers a portable vocabulary for game studies to analyse public play across venue types and regulatory contexts, making visible how specific design and governance decisions influence who appears, where they sit, how long they stay, and what forms of interaction they enact. In short, it clarifies how particular configurations of infrastructure, affect, rules, and rhythms generate distinctive publics in shared play spaces.

BIO

Taoyue Wang is a PhD student at the University of Melbourne, specialising in architecture and media studies. His current work investigates the forms and spatialities of gaming venues, with a primary focus on internet cafés, and examines their interactions with social life and player behaviour through frameworks drawn from cultural studies, anthropology, and science and technology studies (STS).

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Performative Authenticity: Examining Masculinity and Labour of Vietnamese Game Livestreamers

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Keywords

authenticity, masculinity, game streamers, Vietnam, YouTube

INTRODUCTION

Game livestreaming has become crucial in online cultural production and identity negotiation, with game streamers performing for grassroots entertainment and more importantly to sustain platformed livelihoods. Central to game creators is their performances of authenticity, which Woodcock and Johnson (2019) have framed it as a form of affective and aspirational labour (Duffy 2017), the work of turning passions into careers, where streamers work to appear spontaneous, intimate, and real while enduring the pressures of consistency, visibility, and monetisation. In Western contexts, Ruberg and Lark (2021) highlight that game streamers often broadcast in living rooms, home offices, or blur their bedroom backgrounds to resist the highly feminised and erotic appeal of bedrooms. This paper speaks to these discussions but situates in Vietnamese contexts to demonstrate how authenticity and streaming from the bedrooms take on a different meaning in gendered performances and working practices

CONCEPTUALISING VIETNAMESE GAME LIVESTREAMERS

Vietnam is the second-largest gaming market in Southeast Asia, with game streaming accounting for approximately 45% of all online content consumption, often attributed to its young population (Appota Group 2022). This expansion builds on the informal gaming market from *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) policy to the normalisation of e-sports and mobile games (Phan 2023). The streamers do livestream in bedrooms with highly casual manners, regardless of their gender. Yet, this denotes a sign of high informality, rather than sexual appeal.

Additionally, existing literature on the intersection of gaming and masculinities highlights hegemonic, toxic, and misogynistic gaming cultures characterised by white dominance (Salter and Blodgett 2017). In contrast, Vietnamese masculinity is shaped by local norms, Confucian values, and Western masculinities with a long history of war and colonisation. This complexity in gender relations has led to both the reinforcement of gender inequalities (Rydström 2022) and shifting gender roles (Hoang and Yeoh 2011), demonstrating how masculinity is continuously adapted and negotiated. This, therefore, triangulates a performative framework for platform-based work of game livestreamers to extend the largely existing feminised affective labour to masculine domains of game livestreaming, reframing social expectations of gender roles and digital labour. Particularly, this paper explores how game streamers

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navigate and embody masculinity in response to shifting cultural and platform dynamics.

METHODS

This paper employs digital ethnographic methods (Pink et al. 2016) to observe archived streams of Vietnamese game streamers on YouTube and Facebook. In each streamers' channel, I will watch two videos, one of the most viewed and one of the most recent until March 2025. This is to explore whether their work strategies, masculine performances, and representations have been changed as they engage in affective labour while embracing informal and precarious working conditions. Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) will be used to generate emergent themes related to masculinities, labour, and platforms. The section below presents preliminary findings from online observations of 20 livestreams.

PERFORMATIVE AUTHENTICITY IN VIETNAMESE GAME STREAMING

Findings show that Vietnamese streamers update their livestream background as their career grow and viewers can assume their "status". To elaborate, lower-status game streamers tend to make their background as simple as it is, showing their "real" authenticity. As their income improves, however, they often represent their rooms like a techno space, showing an "upgraded" authenticity. So, their performances of authenticity do not fix in any contexts, but performatively changed to negotiate with the platforms, audience expectations but still signal success. Working from the bedroom is associated with domestic labour—often feminised and undervalued in traditional work structures. What these streamers do are redefining social expectations by transforming domestic spaces into sites of visible, profitable, and socially recognised labour, thereby challenging conventional gendered divisions of work.

One practice that they remain unchanged is their performance styles. They use profanity, are chatty, talk loudly in a casual manner, and make jokes. This is because they want to be as real as they are, which maintains their online personas from their early days. More prominently, Vietnamese game streamers form and work in teams, sharing similar performance styles, background setups, and audiences. This reflects the concept of algorithmic gossip to optimise the creators' visibility (Bishop 2019). However, it occurs more frequently among game creators with higher status, and therefore, potentially marginalises those who work individually. By embracing a laid-back and casual approach, these game creators seemingly challenge the conventional norms of masculinity that is tough and emotional restraints.

Overall, this paper argues that Vietnamese game streamers complicate existing discussions on authenticity and masculinity in livestreaming by shifting the focus to Southeast Asia. Their practices of performative authenticity highlight how authenticity is locally adapted in contexts where informality, precarity, and communal collaboration shape platformed livelihoods.

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BIO

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“She is one of the lads”: VTuber Gender Construction and Audience Empowerment

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Keywords

VTubers, live streaming, avatars, online identity, gender performance

INTRODUCTION

Digital gaming remains one of the most prominent activities found on live streaming platforms, with Japanese game streamers frequently using virtual avatars to represent themselves in their content (Johnson & Baguley 2025; Johnson 2024). Shown below in Figure 1, these creators are referred to as Virtual YouTubers or “VTubers” (Li 2023). While they operate much like real-life streamers, VTubers are distinguished by their digitally-mediated performances (Wan & Lu 2023), harnessing technologies such as motion-capture to embody an avatar – a fictional, interactive “character” that exists alongside human creators (Bredikhina 2020; Sakuma et al. 2023).



Figure 1: Screenshot of VTuber Inugami Korone live streaming gameplay (Lee 2020).

Rooted in the *otaku* subculture, VTuber avatar designs are largely inspired by Japanese animation and video game aesthetics (Lu et al. 2021). However, they continue to garner popularity beyond this context; a 2024 Streams Charts audience analysis reported a consistent yearly growth in VTuber viewership globally, denoting 403.1 million hours of content watched within the first quarter (Dempsey 2024). As streamers, VTubers occupy a participatory realm where individuals can express themselves and form counterpublics against hegemonic, masculine technocultures rampant in gaming communities (Freeman & Wohn 2020; Salter & Blodgett 2012). With digital avatars

further proven to be significant tools for identity affirmation within gaming cultures (Schultze 2014; Taylor 2002; Whitehouse et al. 2023), their potential to broadcast various gender identities become crucial cases to explore. This paper thus seeks to provide a novel understanding of how VTubers distinctly *co*-construct diverse gender representations in real-time, examining the extent to which they empower themselves and their audiences in the androcentric space of gaming.

In light of this, I relate the outcome of my study into how VTuber game streamers create online gender presentations, investigating their ability to foster inclusive spaces for marginalised gender identities. Using a qualitative approach that combines digital ethnography and reflexive thematic analysis, data from 10 English-speaking VTubers (see Table 1) and their audience responses were collected and analysed. The selection aimed to capture a wide spectrum of identities through diverse model genders and “offline” pronouns.

VTuber ID	Live Platform	Model Gender	“Offline” Pronouns	Company Affiliation	Subscriber/Follower Count
V1	YouTube	Male	He/Him	Yes	100k - 500k
V2	YouTube	-	She/Her	Yes	500k - 1M
V3	Twitch	Female	She/Her	Yes	100k - 500k
V4	Twitch	Female	-	Yes	500k - 1M
V5	YouTube	Male	He/Him	Yes	1M - 1.5M
V6	Twitch	Female	He/Him	No	100k - 500k
V7	Twitch	Male	He/Him	No	100k - 500k
V8	Twitch	-	Any/All	No	100k - 500k
V9	Twitch	Male	He/Him	No	100k - 500k
V10	Twitch	Female	She/Her	No	1M - 1.5M

Table 1: Demographic profiles of VTubers observed in this study. ‘-’ refers to indeterminate gender or pronouns.

My findings reveal that the creation of a VTuber’s online gender is not static, but rather a dynamic process that adapts in real-time through interactions between their design and fictive persona, their “offline” identity, and audience engagement. Notably, unlike traditional streamers, VTubers must navigate the expectations of not only their viewers but also the affordances of a real-life “actor” and a virtual “character”. This renders their gender identity a ludic *co*-construction rather than a fixed expression. Grounded in theories of online self-presentation and gender performativity (Butler 1988; Goffman 1973; Nakamura 2002), I frame these elements as distinct components of a VTuber’s gender “stage production” (Figure 2).

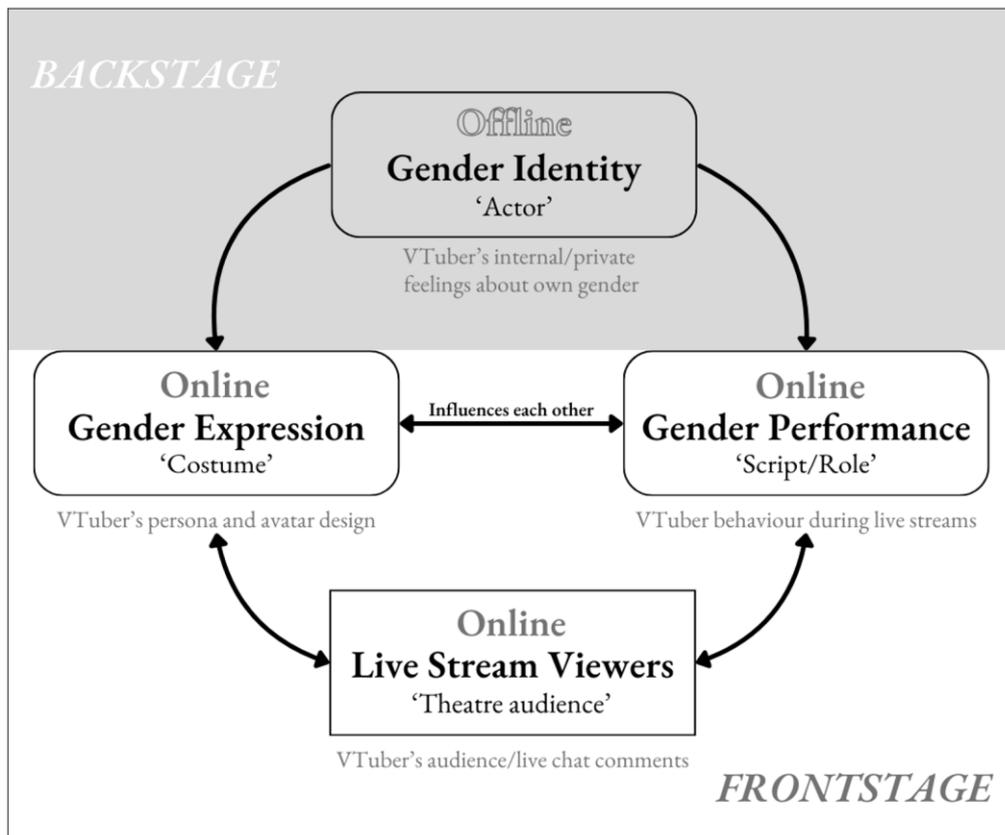


Figure 2: VTuber Online Gender Co-Construction.

Following Figure 2, VTubers can transcend rigid gender norms through their “costume” and “script/role”. Due to the medium's flexibility, they can emphasise feminine, masculine, or gender non-conforming characteristics through their models, backstories, streaming assets, and how they enact them (V1, V2, V3, V6, V8). These attributes are supported – if not directly influenced – by live-chat interactions (“theatre audience”). While VTubers can explore diverse gender presentations, my findings suggest that their portrayals are often sexualised, with specific content and model characteristics exaggerated to align with traditional gender expectations (V3, V4, V8, V10). Equally, while certain VTubers cultivate inclusive spaces that celebrate diverse identities, others limit explicit audience comments of identity empowerment by enforcing chat guidelines. Though direct expressions were rare, words of recognition and affirmation regarding certain VTubers’ subversive gender presentations were considered as indirectly validating. This reflects the broader gendered nature of streaming and its entanglement with affective labour, where maintaining emotional and community cohesion often falls disproportionately on the game streamer (Ruberg & Brewer 2022; Woodcock & Johnson 2019). As such, the fluidity of VTuber gender representation is not only influenced by the “offline” individual, but also by the precarious demands of the streaming economy and audience expectations. This study thus offers insight into how VTubers both reflect and redefine online gender identities, especially concerning marginalised groups within games live streaming communities, and possibilities for alternative presentations to the heteromale norm that continues to pervade digital gaming.

BIO

Zoe Li is a PhD candidate and Sessional Academic at the University of Sydney’s Department of Media and Communications. Based in the Sydney Games and Play Lab, her research explores Virtual YouTubers (VTubers) and their gendered labour. In 2024, she completed her undergraduate thesis (First Class Honours), investigating how they

construct diverse gender representations and empower their audiences. Zoe's focus remains passionately rooted in feminist games studies, with a keen interest in digital identity and interactive media. She hopes to continue expanding our understanding of VTubers and their profound impact on modern digital culture.

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Sustainable Sociality: Managing Behaviour in Videogame Communities on Discord

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Keywords

virtual communities, game fandom, Discord, online moderation, actor-network theory

INTRODUCTION

Computer-mediated communications platforms play host to countless, myriad interactions between gamers every day. Users unified by shared interests and ideals coalesce into fan communities centred around specific games, genres, or developers, and engage in social, creative, and collaborative endeavours (Jenkins 2006). As such publics grow, they inevitably face challenges in terms of how they might continue to expand, maintain the ‘critical mass’ of user activity needed to sustain themselves (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar 2003), and keep their shared space(s) orderly, friendly, and safe (Lo 2018; Seering et al. 2019). Utilising the affordances of the platforms they use in imaginative ways (Baym 2000), such as by creating bots to automate procedures (Saetnan 2000), online communities adjust the spaces they inhabit to enrich interactions and safeguard shared norms (Latzko-Toth 2014).

The communications platform Discord is a site of great significance amongst game-related cultural spaces, with over 150 million current active users (Discord n.d.). Initially marketed as a tool created ‘by and for’ gamers (Lazarides 2015), it continues to see wide use from diverse gaming communities, developers and content creators (Kocik et al. 2024; Johnson 2024). In the 10 years since its launch, Discord has been the subject of scholarship examining its governance (Robinson 2022), its adoption by communities accustomed to other platforms (Kiene et al. 2019), its monetisation model (Robinson 2022a), and (very recently) its utility to fandoms in particular (Kocik et al. 2024; Wagenaar 2024). However, understanding of the dynamic methods by which communities are organising themselves on Discord – the ways they harness and innovate on the platform’s affordances, and adjust them over time – remains limited.

Within this context, the current paper presents the findings of a study that explored the complex interactions inside a community of fans of an indie videogame studio on Discord between its human inhabitants and the customised features of the virtual space they inhabited. Utilising a combination of participant observation and computer-mediated discourse analysis, this study gathered data from text-based interactions occurring across 30 days in the case study server. Using Actor-Network Theory (Latour 1988) as a framework for understanding how human and non-human (e.g. textual, technical) elements configure and influence technology use, by examining the customised design features of the community space and ‘following the actors’ (Randall et al. 2007) I found that technical actors such as server architecture,

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custom bots, and Discord features were configured to guide and shape how and where users on the case study server interacted. The resulting framework put forward by this paper presents a novel and I believe useful perspective for analysing online community practices, through which inferences about value and power can be derived by understanding how fan communities strategically configure their spaces.

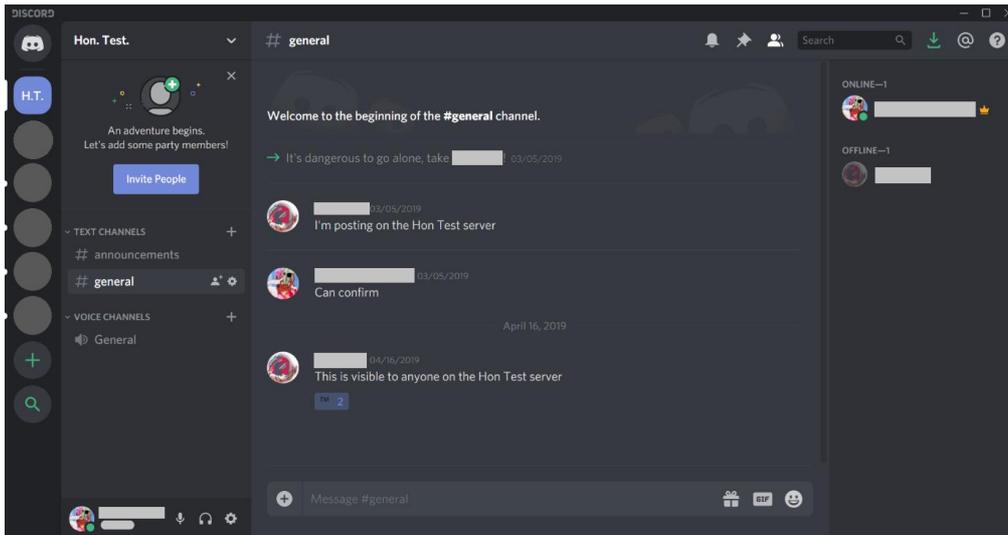


Figure 1: Discord’s server framework allows elevated users (e.g. owner, signified by the crown mark) to adjust the shared space’s rules and appearance.

Specifically, I propose that sociotechnical arrangements on the case study server took three distinct forms, classifiable based on the distinct prosocial community objectives that they helped to maintain. The first, channels, regulated social exchanges by imposing norms of how different parts of the server should be used, in order to preserve the overall quality of its mostly text-based conversations. The second type, ‘soft’ gates, were set up to encourage users to identify and engage with the community through in-group knowledge invocations and welcoming rituals, facilitating the active participation which is vital to communities in general. The final type, ‘hard’ gates, restricted access to the server and/or its sublocations based on moderator-dispensed markers of trust – allowing problem actors to be warned or removed from the server, or trusted actors to participate in channels deemed ‘sensitive’. These categories provide a nuanced method of identifying how the localised design decisions of specialised community spaces reflect and enable the resident communities’ collective social goals.

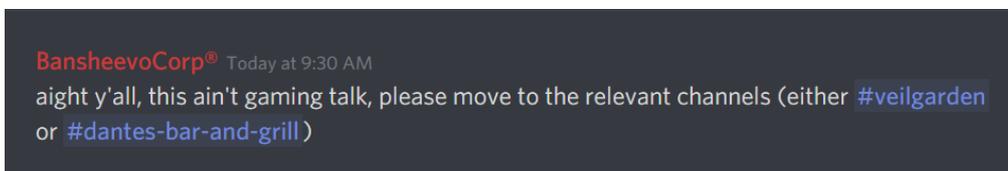


Figure 2: Discord users create sublocations on their servers to organise discourses and actively reinforce this behaviour with others.

The study also discovered complex ways in which not only moderators, but ordinary users, made conscious efforts to maintain these programs of use and realign interactions that went against them. In many instances on the case study server, users tried to curtail divergent behaviours (such as discussing a topic in an inappropriate channel) without moderator intervention, using the latter as a relatively late resort. While mods and admins supersede regular users on a strictly technical level, I found that the community had developed protocols to ensure the former’s transparency and

accountability to the wider membership, and that mods attempted to de-emphasise their status unless they needed to invoke it. The management approaches defined in the paper demonstrate how authority within online communities, despite often being tied to elevated privileges, is also constantly negotiated and enabled by all committed members.

BIO

James Baguley is a PhD candidate from the Department of Media and Communications at the University of Sydney. Currently based at the Sydney Games and Play Lab, he completed his undergraduate thesis in Digital Cultures on the sociotechnical strategies employed by online videogame fandom on Discord. He is keenly interested in online subcultures and sociality, and hopes to conduct further research into the dynamics of relationships between creatively-oriented online entities (e.g. video-makers, videogame developers) and their audiences.

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The boundaries of competitive discourse: An esports perspective between banter, trash talk and toxicity.

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Keywords

Esports, competitive discourse, banter, trash talk, toxicity, consumers

INTRODUCTION

Communication is a fundamental part of multiplayer esports, yet understanding forms of competitive discourse has been a challenge in the literature. To date, research has identified banter, trash talk, and toxicity as forms of competitive communication. However, definitions and boundaries of these behaviours have been ambiguous and inconsistent. For example, Chang et al. (2023) defined toxicity and trash talk as forms of hostile communication, whereas Pujante (2021) observed that trash talk could be inoffensive and harmless depending on the circumstances, and Beres et al. (2021) noted that banter could be an acceptable form of trash talk if there is no malicious intent.

Of note, online video gaming communities have established social norms surrounding behaviours associated with competitive discourse, with recent research categorising diverse perspectives around its use (Kaye et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2024; Poeller et al., 2023). In esports research, Irwin et al. (2023) observed that spectator perceptions of trash talk are more accepting when the behaviour aligns with banter, but are frowned upon if it reflects toxicity, yet this was not explored in further detail. As a result, there is a limited understanding of how esports communities perceive and participate in banter, trash talk, and toxicity, presenting a critical research gap.

This research aimed to explore how esports consumers perceive and differentiate between banter, trash talk, and toxicity. To develop a classification, online surveys were conducted to gather spectators, professional players, and industry workers perspectives and social norms regarding trash talk across various esports. A total of 591 responses were collected from participants between 18 and 52 years of age ($M = 24.64$, $SD = 4.88$). All data was analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to support and build on current literature.

Four core themes were identified, each with sub-elements that encompassed distinct and overlapping aspects between banter, trash talk and toxicity:

(1) Motivations behind player conduct: Participants identified three sub-motivations for competitive communication: (a) gaining a competitive advantage, often through trash talk; (b) harassing others, related to toxicity; and (c) creating positive interplay, including banter and trash talk, depending on further core themes.

(2) Contextual elements of the behaviour: Participants highlighted that differences between banter, trash talk, and toxicity based on *context* in: (a) discussions about player attributes, where trash talk and toxicity were seen as unacceptable when focused on personal traits rather than in-game skills; (b) the tone, when banter was light-hearted, trash talk could verge on serious or aggressive behaviour, resembling more apparent toxicity; and (c) the frequency of such behaviour in-game, where excessive conduct is considered toxic.

(3) Influence of consent: While the first two themes are widely discussed in the literature, participants noted that banter and trash talk can be distinguished from toxicity when they happen through mutual consent and voluntary interaction among players. Notably, toxic behaviour involved actions outside of this shared consent and social context. Trash talk and banter were viewed as exchanges that could be reciprocated, with participants taunting each other in turn without crossing the line into harassment or harm.

(4) Rapport between players: In this theme, banter and trash talk were perceived as ways to build rapport among friends, teammates, and even rivals, indicating that social norms might not always reflect the competitive nature of the game. Participants also described trash talk as a sign of camaraderie between teammates and opposing players. Conversely, toxicity signified a lack of rapport shared between players before the match.

The findings provide a nuanced view of how consumers perceive different types of competitive communication. Additionally, future research can extend the themes to include other forms of behaviour highlighted in current literature but not explored in this study, such as trolling or cyberbullying (Hilvert-Bruce and Neill, 2020). By defining clearer boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable competitive discourse, esports tournaments and video game developers can better establish guidelines for such behaviour.

BIO

Sidney Irwin is an early career researcher at the School of Health, Medical and Applied Sciences at Central Queensland University. She received her doctorate from the same university. Her focus is on forms of unsportsmanlike conduct in esports and is expanding her expertise towards esports psychology, human factors and user experiences. She has a qualitative research background and has grown her field of research towards rail, forestry and shiftwork sectors.

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The Discursive Past, Present and Future of the Microgame

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Keywords

microgames, minigames, scale, game production studies, serious games

INTRODUCTION

The first game released in Nintendo’s WarioWare series received a different title for each regional market: *Made in Wario* (Nintendo R&D1 2003) in Japan, *WarioWare, Inc.: Minigame Mania* in Europe and Australia, and *WarioWare, Inc.: Mega Microgame\$* in the USA. The American release’s adoption of the term “microgame” to describe the short, simple and referential collection of minigames neatly codified a mode of intentionally small-scale game design that persists throughout a range of videogame contexts today (Wardrip-Fruin 2020; Goldberg 2025). When read across different fields of videogame history, the microgame also appears to be a remarkably permeable term, imbued with conflicting expectations and ideologies about value, form and the cultural role of digital play. This paper explores this pervasive, yet little-examined term over nearly fifty years of commercial games marketing, serious games research and game development funding. In doing so, it positions the microgame as an exemplary way to understand the aesthetic aims, operational logics and material limits of games production alongside broader conceptual thought on scale and systematicity in contemporary technoculture.

I first provide a brief history of the term across 1970s tabletop gaming, serious games and commercial videogame criticism. Prior scholarship on microgames is concentrated within the field of serious games and has largely sought to demonstrate the import and efficacy of microgames as a training tool for students and workers (Sommel et al. 1981; Lukosch et al. 2016; Rahmadi et al. 2021). While this offers a valuable working definition for microgames within the long use of videogames in professional settings, little has been done to track the cultural function of the term itself, or how such an understanding may also relate to other efforts to define, develop and sell microgames (Gredler 1996). To open the microgame up for further interdisciplinary consideration, I address the term’s different definitions and use cases in marketing materials, its role as design terminology, as well as the entanglements and distinctions between microgames and the broader term “minigame”. I argue that these disparate attempts to conceptualise and sell microgames converge in their shared preoccupation with the management and presentation of strictly limited spatial, technological, financial and temporal resources. By discussing how real-world processes of game production and play may problematise a microgame’s intended function, I show how this discursive focus may offer a rich historical intersection between games production studies and the study of gaming culture.

To further understand the affordances and limits of explicitly small-scale game-making, I also read these entangled histories alongside interdisciplinary scholarship on knowledge production, new media and contemporary capitalism. This is achieved via Clifford Siskin’s (2016, p.1) understanding of the system as the dominant “genre” of modern knowledge and Zachary Horton’s (2023) positioning of scale as crucial

mediator of disciplinary thought. Such conceptual vantages offer a novel vantage to consider how cultural efforts to stabilise games at the “micro” scale may be underpinned by the same cultural logics and material constraints of contemporary capitalism that have long been interrogated in game studies (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter 2009; Bodi 2024). My specific focus on the ideological implications of small-scale game-making further questions the role of videogames within broader platform contexts, which may be particularly relevant as games researchers begin to interrogate the surge in popularity of games hosted as “mini-apps” within social media platform WeChat (Zhang et al. 2021; Wang et al. 2023).

I finally offer a preliminary discussion of the microgame’s discursive role in Australian games funding. I use the Australian Centre of the Moving Image (ACMI)’s 2025 callout for microgames to be developed for exhibition in their forthcoming Game Worlds exhibition as an invaluable local case study to track the formal commonalities, technical differences, and cultural afterlives of non-educational titles that have been commissioned and framed explicitly as microgames.

Through tracing the microgame’s complicated history and future, this paper argues that the language of scale offers a crucial, yet underexamined way of making the history of videogames culturally legible. As it draws from contemporary theory about scale, systems and software to attend to this widespread, yet definitionally unstable terminology, it further seeks to contribute to game studies’ ongoing cultural and material turns (Jayemane 2012; Germaine 2022; Hondroudakis 2024).

BIO

Rory Manning Graham (he/him) is a PhD student in Media and Communications at the University of Sydney, supervised by Mark R Johnson and Chris Chesher. His research explores the concept of scale in media discourse and the ways scalar language mediate cultural thought about video games across aesthetic, commercial and educational contexts.

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“The games-as-an-art-form argument is dead”– Exploring expressions of games in Australian museums

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Keywords

Museums, games, preservation, exhibitions, game design

INTRODUCTION

The increasing presence of games in Australian museums has been well documented (Arneil 2024, Brin & McMaster 2018, Connor 2025), yet work that examines the relationship between games and museums is often suffused by a sense of unease. Authors are either imparting the urgency of games preservation, entreating museums to move faster with conservation efforts (Barwick et al. 2011, Lowood et al. 2009), or asserting the validity of games in the museum context and describing the associated challenges in their exhibition (Appleby 2023, Oulton 2019). Parallel to this sits the literature that examines the design of games for museums, including much of my own research (Beavis et al. 2021, Booij 2024, Seale et al. 2025). This work carries similar anxieties, and often positions games as tools with which to advance museum goals in a way that is both reliant on and simultaneously diminishes or seeks to render irrelevant the entertainment qualities of games. This defensiveness is likely a product of the museum as both a leisure and an educational environment (Falk 2016). However, it sits awkwardly alongside the work on bringing videogames into the museum, which openly appreciates the cultural relevance of games as leisure activities or their artistic or design qualities.

To probe these tensions, and to build an understanding of how Australian museums in particular are grappling with these challenges, I interviewed 17 museum professionals about their use of games across ACMI, the Powerhouse Museum, Science Gallery Melbourne, MOD., and the Australian Maritime Museum. I kept the scope broad in order to learn how museum professionals conceptualised games, and to not inadvertently exclude particular expressions of games that I had not necessarily accounted for. I sought participants in a range of positions, including leadership, curatorial, education, and public programs, as well as two game developers whose games had been acquired and exhibited by ACMI and the Powerhouse respectively. From this data, I have constructed a typology of games in museums (Seale et al. 2024), and through further thematic analysis (full paper forthcoming), I have

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identified that games in Australian museums fit into one or more of the following practices: documentation, display, dialogue, and design.

Documentation describes the work that is being done to collect and conserve games as heritage material. Much of the literature on this topic argues for diverse collections policies, emphasising not only the preservation of games beyond the mainstream, but also an acknowledgement of games as complex entities with no fixed state (Eklund et al. 2019; Manning 2017, Stuckey 2014, Swalwell 2017). Although the same urgency applies to the preservation of Australian games as it does globally (and is similarly challenged by resourcing constraints), Australian museum professionals showed a nuanced perspective, recognising them not only as playable designed objects, but as sophisticated structures of networked paratexts made up of many individual and community experiences, embedded in player and developer ecosystems, and changing over time.

Display represents the use of games in exhibition contexts, separate to their presence in a museum's collection. Similarly to documentation, the question of what aspect of the game to display—the art or design, the playable experience, or the cultural context—is central. Although participants were cognisant of this, and were often trying to represent multiple aspects of games within a single exhibition, the low frequency of exhibitions featuring games presents challenges for serving multiple audiences.

Dialogue—the interaction between museums and games communities—represents a key strength of Australian museums. Both ACMI and the Powerhouse have artistic residencies for game developers, and find many other ways to support devs outside of this. Similarly, Science Gallery Melbourne recently hosted Freeplay's Angles conference, facilitating a direct dialogue between the gallery and the Freeplay community. This dialogue is critical for mediating the imposition of institutional biases in the exhibition of games (Eklund et al. 2019, McMaster 2018). Several participants touched on legitimacy, directly referencing the games-as-art debate (Parker 2018). There is a strong perception that the inclusion of games in museums confers legitimacy, regardless of the global significance of games or the lateness with which museums have taken up documentation practices.

Finally, design refers to the creation of new games for museums, a practice that sits somewhat apart from the first three activities. However, of the museums in this study, four out of five had exhibited an existing videogame as part of an exhibition and also designed a new game as an interpretive strategy or educational tool. Reflections on design activities were problematised by a lack of resources and the risks of technology based implementations, but surfaced nuanced considerations of the impact of games on the experience of the museum (and vice versa). This research adds to a growing body of work attempting to understand the unique interactions between games and museums, highlighting the strength of both the Australian games and museums industries.

BIO

Nellie Seale is a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne. Her work examines the intersection of games, technology, and museums. Nellie is also an artist and a game designer, and her other research interests include Megagames, accessibility in games, and games as cultural heritage.

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Theorising immediacy through videogames

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Keywords

Immediacy, videogames, flow, immersion, aesthetics, Kornbluh, capitalism

INTRODUCTION

In this presentation we propose that videogames are uniquely situated to help us better understand one of twenty-first century capitalism's dominant aesthetic styles: immediacy. Immediacy is marked by flexibility, fluidity, presence, connection, instantaneity and an abundant, eternal now. Building on the framework of cultural critic Kornbluh's acclaimed *Immediacy: or, the Style of Too-late Capitalism* (2024), we consider the close ties between videogames and immediacy. Kornbluh offers immediacy as a diagnostic mode of comprehending the complex and form-resistant affective and aesthetic landscape of contemporary capitalism. While Kornbluh's work is notable for its omnivorous approach to discussing media forms and short close-readings that make compelling connections between form, formlessness, economics and the psyche, videogames are largely omitted from her analysis. We aim to contribute to Kornbluh's influential theorising by arguing that there are distinctly ludic and playful dimensions to immediacy as a style. We examine two ways that games help us think through ludic dimensions of immediacy—flow and immersion—and further consider how games can shun the cultural stylings of immediacy by reintroducing mediation. Overall, this presentation will not only show the importance of Kornbluh's writing on immediacy in understanding videogames, but also discuss the essential role videogame analysis has in understanding the cultural styles of "too-late capitalism".

First, we supplement Kornbluh's discussion of mediatic flow with a conversation about skill-based flow, using Soderman's *Against Flow* (2021) to consider skill-based flow's relationship to immediacy. We discuss the ludic qualities of flow with

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reference to Santa Monica Studio's *God of War* (2018). *God of War*'s world is flowing: a constant stream of images without interruption. *God of War*'s "oner"-style camera helps to induce skill-based flow by pushing players to continue without the stoppage of a loading screen, resisting any reminder that the play session may end. Like other immediate media, games that employ skill-based flow are often draw-in, engrossing, highly affective, and filled with potential for expression and enjoyment. Using *God of War* as an example, we argue videogames can theorise immediacy and its flowing ideologies in "too-late capitalism": lean-in, addictive, absorptive, interactive and "crisis-continuous" (Kornbluh, 2024, 17)—not challenging but coping.

From fluid metaphor to fluid metaphor, we then turn to immersion, showing how games invite closer affective connection with the player through a ludic form of immersion that Calleja (2011) calls "incorporation", arguing that interactivity and immediacy are heavily intertwined. We discuss how games have historically been positioned in fan, media, and marketing discourses as immersive to the point that they can blur the line between reality and media. An arcade flyer for *Mortal Kombat* (1992) shows Kano and Raiden reaching out of an arcade cabinet to terrorise two teenagers, as we are told the game is "so real it hurts" (Fig. 1). We consider the contemporary evolution of this immersive turn in *Love and Deepspace* (2024): a gacha dating simulator that can reside in the intimate space of the player's mobile phone. Boyfriends in *Deepspace* will leave voicemails and send messages to the player throughout the real-time day, and "reach towards the screen and provide an imaginary abdomen massage" (Harkin, 2025, n.p.). *Deepspace* signifies a proximity to the player that is strong enough to break through the screen's barrier; not "So Real it Hurts" but "So Real it Heals". We discuss how immersion is close and affective, but also a means of quickening circulation and time-space compression (Harvey 1992). As immersive videogames dissolve mediation we not only immerse ourselves in the fictional world, but the fictional world immerses itself in our own.



Figure 1: *Mortal Kombat* Arcade Flyer (1992)



Figure 1: *Love and Deepspace* (2024)

Finally, we end the presentation with suggestions for potential directions for critical immediacy and consider how games might also shun the cultural stylings of immediacy by reintroducing mediation. Game designers use complexity, difficulty, distance, scale, confusion, boredom, and indirect interaction to force players to think of the boundaries of the game itself, as well as the mediating systems that are integral to social functioning. Even though Kornbluh (2024, 122) suggests that immediacy is

implicit in the “essential gaming values” of flow and immersion, immediacy is not essential to games. Overall, this presentation will not only show the importance of immediacy for understanding videogames, but also how videogames act as a crucial form to better understand immediacy, mediation and contemporary capitalism while supplementing analyses of other media.

BIO

Heather Blakey is a writer and 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. She specialises in contemporary aesthetics and affect theory from a Marxist context, and teaches contemporary literature, speculative fiction and media theory at The University of Western Australia.

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“This Trophy... Is For you”: Participatory Cultures in Esports

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Keywords

esports, platforms, live streaming, parasociality, memes, Twitch

INTRODUCTION

The camera is set at a low angle, looking up towards Lee “Faker” Sanghyeok as he steps forward to dramatic background music.

As Faker speaks – “To those that believed in us, no matter what. The fifth trophy...” – the music reaches a crescendo, cutting to silence with his final words: “...is for you.”

A final cut to the winner’s trophy ends the video before an information slide about the teased event, the League of Legends 2024 World Championship (or “Worlds”) Grand Finals, appears.

This *League of Legends (LoL)* (Riot Games 2009) match between Korean team T1 and Chinese “superteam” Bilibili Gaming (BLG) would come to break esports viewership records, peaking at almost 7 million viewers across a variety of different streaming platforms (including YouTube and Twitch, among others) (Esports Charts 2024). Instrumental to the match’s immense viewership was the aforementioned ‘Faker’, one of the game’s most experienced competitors, and indisputably its most successful. Faker is a five-time Worlds winner and is the first inductee into the game’s recently created ‘Hall of Legends’ despite still being an active player (LoL Esports 2024). Such a decision by Riot Games highlights how invaluable Faker is, not merely to the game’s competitive scene, but also to its casual playerbase and overall cultural impact. Using Faker as a case study, this presentation will examine how the esports industry is developing in the face of increasingly platformised digital cultures. Drawing on its analysis of official Riot Games productions and social media posts, it forwards *memeability*, *personalities as narrative co-authors*, *parasociality* as three main hallmarks of a participatory esports culture that is being mediated by platforms.

These characteristics have significant parallels with the origins of the esports industry, which in its current form can be traced to the 1990s with networked shooter games such as *Doom* (id Software 1993) and *Quake* (id Software 1996), as well as the Real Time Strategy Game *StarCraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 1998) in Korea. This early phase in the esports industry is notable for its grassroots nature and local, amateur tournaments (Taylor 2018);

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however, it would soon develop into semi-professional and eventually professional leagues, some of which would be supported by game publishers themselves (Wagner 2006). Since then, the industry has continued to grow – competitions have become increasingly organised and structured, with game publishers even directly hosting their own tournaments and the incorporation of collegiate teams and programs for esports (Steinkuehler 2020). When combined with the deliberate use of competitive sports broadcast conventions such as pre-game show analyses and commentators, these processes help to push the concept of an esports industry into legitimacy (Turtiainen et al. 2020). Consequently, esports became entangled with processes of content production, distribution and logistical infrastructures, likening the industry to “media sport” (Turtiainen et al. 2020, 353) or “media/sport” (Taylor 2018, 137). More than merely competition, esports is now product that is consumed and leads to further financial investment, with studies investigating motivations behind engagement (Lee and Schoenstedt 2011; Abbasi et al. 2021; Block et al. 2018). Thus, while platform affordances have enabled the development of participatory cultures, this presentation shows how such practices are still driven by consumption dynamics. Engagement with esports cultures therefore is filtered through multiple layers of corporate-driven mediation, making understanding their relationship with one another essential as the esports industry develops.

This presentation draws on data collected from an ongoing digital ethnography (2024-present). As part of ethnography, the author has followed relevant *LoL* content creators and official accounts, regularly liking posts to influence the author’s algorithm. The findings presented here are therefore preliminary observations, with specific post examples taken from YouTube, Reddit, and Twitter to demonstrate how Faker’s successful career has catalysed continuous engagement with *LoL* esports. The presentation first examines official narratives surrounding Faker through tournament trailer videos released by Riot Games. Communities then transform these narratives, connecting them to other players within the sport through various memes and remixes (see Shifman 2014; Knobel and Lankshear 2008). Some of these transformations occur within the context of specific content creator personalities, revealing how live streamers can function as esports narrative co-creators that mediate how viewers engage with esports. As a result of these dynamics, parasocial connections are formed not just between viewers and players, but also with the personalities that mediate esports consumption. This presentation explores one consequence of this phenomenon, examining how esports teams and personalities across the industry have exploited these emotional connections to encourage increased consumption, resulting in what viewers have called the “kpopification of esports” (fy ★?+ +♥ 2025; zeek 2025). Thus, while *LoL* esports have used memeability, personality, and parasociality to maintain industry longevity, these characteristics can risk exploitation of the very viewers that sustain it.

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BIO

Geoffrey Lee is a PhD candidate and tutor in the Discipline of Media and Communications at the University of Sydney. His thesis will explore how humour is transferred from the livestreaming platform Twitch onto other connected social media platforms and is part of the Sydney Games and Play Lab. He is also interested more broadly in the intersection of livestreaming, humour, and platformisation.

Types of Fear: Using Video Game Character Design to Evoke Uncertainty, Apprehension and Disgust

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Keywords

Video game character design, horror games, player emotions

INTRODUCTION

Effective video game character design clearly communicates, through visual elements, aspects of a character such as their personality or role in the game's story (Sloan, 2015). Ineffective or unappealing character design can become detrimental to a video game's overall reception by the public and affect a player's ability to suspend their disbelief and immerse themselves in the narrative (Sierra Rativa, 2022). What needs to be communicated visually in a character design can differ vastly depending on the video game's genre, art style, and the narrative role of the character. As a result, design approaches and illustration techniques also vastly differ depending on the intended final video game product. As well as communicating aspects of a character visually, effective character design also produces an emotional response from a player (Nieminen, 2017).

However, there is a lack of research around video game character design and how it elicits emotional responses in players (Blom, 2020). Characters play a central role in connecting different plots and stories within a video game together because they are the elements of consistency between these stories. Player characters in particular directly affect a player's experience because they serve as the player's conduit to the game world (Blom, 2020). Therefore, understanding how different design choices affect a player's emotional response to a video game character is important to consider during the character design process. This research gap is particularly important to address in the context of the horror video game genre because effective character design in horror video games should result in characters evoking fear in players (Spittle, 2011). While there are studies that explore creating fear responses through general video game design (e.g. Graja, Lopes, & Chanel, 2021), there is minimal research into how this is done through character design (e.g. Scheider, Wang & Yang, 2007) and visual concept art. There is also minimal research into how a design concept's effectiveness can be preserved during its translation into a 3D model.

To address this research gap, practice-led research (Candy, 2006) and Piggot-Irvine's (2002) Problem Resolving Action Research Model (PRAR) were utilised to identify and apply video game character design techniques to communicate and evoke specific fear responses. Three horror video game character concept artworks and one 3D model were developed using video game character design techniques adapted from relevant literature (e.g. Thon, 2019, Isbister, 2022) and existing character case studies (e.g. Pyramid Head, Konami 2001). By using both academic literature and characters

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from published games, research and industry work could be combined to understand how different character design methods function from both a theoretical and practical standpoint (Klimas et al., 2025). The three video game character concept artworks focused on evoking the fear responses of uncertainty, apprehension and disgust and were developed in individual action research cycles following Piggot-Irvine's (2002) model.

The character design concept artworks were evaluated by 13 video game designers across three action research cycles in both written questionnaire and interview format. Adjustments to improve clarity of design and effectiveness of evoking desired emotional responses were made based on gathered feedback. The selected adjustments were chosen based on trends identified within the gathered feedback; if an undesired response was communicated by multiple participants, it was considered a high priority to adjust the responsible elements of the character's design. The success of the applied changes would be evaluated through participant feedback in the following research cycle.

Findings from this process were used to develop a framework for designing characters to elicit the fear responses of uncertainty, apprehension and disgust. The framework organises different character design techniques by emotional response. It also lists each technique's use of character design elements (e.g. colour and shape) and what the intended effect of the technique on the player is, with reference to applicable literature. This framework helps to condense different video game character design techniques into an efficient format by breaking them down into their different features and applications. This format of organising techniques provides a connection between academic literature and industry practice, facilitating the creation of more diverse game characters by combining different techniques. Due to smaller teams, less industry experience and smaller budgets for projects (Keogh, 2019), independent and emerging game designers need resources that are easily accessible and applicable (Freeman et al., 2020). The framework includes multiple character design techniques in a discernible format that can easily be shared and understood by a team of designers. The framework assists independent and emerging video game designers in creating effective and communicative character designs for horror games because of its accessibility and condensed format. It also highlights the need for more academic research into horror video game characters and their effects on players by only focusing on three potential emotions. Further projects could be undertaken to explore other emotions and identify other horror video game character design techniques in the future.

BIO

Tiana Toussaint is an incoming PhD student in the School of Business and Creative Industries at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia. Her research focuses on how video game design communicates messages, such as emotional responses and narrative context, to players. Tiana is also a university tutor in video game design and an independent character and environment concept artist.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Dr Colleen Stieler-Hunt and Dr Alexander Muscat for their supervision and guidance on this project.

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“We could call it a homecoming, or homeward bound maybe?”: The disappearing home in *Final Fantasy VII Rebirth* (2024)

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Keywords

Nostalgia, desire, remakes, *Final Fantasy VII Rebirth*, *Final Fantasy VII*, homecoming, lack, psychoanalysis

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I explore the way that nostalgia in videogames is dependent on an unassailable lack in the player, that can be revealed or intensified by their experience with nostalgic texts. I turn to *Final Fantasy VII Rebirth* (Square Enix Creative Business Unit I, 2024), which, in its capacity as the remake of a well loved game, comments on how the player’s desire for homecoming precipitates the dissolution of home and the fragmentation of self on encountering their object of desire.

Going against the well-known argument that nostalgia in the culture industries terminates our subjective and political imagination (Jameson 1998; Fisher 2009), recent scholarship in game studies suggests that the self of the past can be recuperated and stabilised, either through returning to the texts of the past (Robinson and Bowman 2022; Toft-Nielsen 2019), or engaging with those that evoke it (Sloan 2016; Waszkiewicz and Bakun 2020; Waszkiewicz and Tyminska 2024). While these attempts to rehabilitate nostalgia are useful, their emphasis on the apparent stability of the subject and the past obscures the homesickness that defines nostalgia, and which makes it so experientially and conceptually interesting. With retrogaming, the abundance of games deploying the styles of the past, and the industrial preoccupation with remakes, nostalgic texts have never been so plentiful, and yet player thirst for nostalgia has not abated. It would appear that players’ want for nostalgic texts demonstrates less their desire to overcome their homesickness, than to intensify the yearning for something they feel they’ve lost and cannot recover.

Rebirth is a remake that is uncommonly determined to confront the player with issues of fate and the pains of returning to the familiar. To properly account for it, and to restore the critical ambivalence to gaming nostalgia, I perform a textual analysis of *Rebirth* through scholarship on nostalgia, desire, and homecoming. Contrary to the promise of the past as a thing that can simply be returned to, Janet Donohoe (2016) argues the act of homecoming reveals the temporal discontinuity between the image of the past and its reality, thus exposing the homecomer to the not-at-home-ness of their being (171). Writers on nostalgia such as Susan Stewart (1992) insist the nostalgic enjoys yearning, and so desires the absence that sustains nostalgia rather

than the object to extinguish it (23). For psychoanalysts like Mari Ruti (2018), all subjects believe they've lost something unfathomably precious (*das Ding*), and it's from this absence that all desire emerges (118). According to Ruti, the objects most precious to us are the ones closest to this lost Thing, and thereby intensify our lack and induce subjective turmoil (114). Brendan Keogh (2014) writes on memory as an obstacle to subjective coherence, and Benjamin Nicoll (2024) explains how these to all appearances painful revelations (non-belonging, lack, failure) are made manageable, and even enjoyable, in videogame play. By attending to the remake through these insights, we can chart the ways that absence is the precondition for our being homeward bound, and the thing that makes the image of the past so valuable.

I find that *Rebirth* stages itself as a series of painful homecomings for its characters, and for the player, who is also returning to the familiar via the remake. Each homecoming draws the player's attention to a different obstacle between them and the past they think they desire: memory, time, and death. Whenever one of these obstacles is removed by the game, the object of the past is emptied of the qualities that made it desirable in the first place. Through the play of obstacles then, *Rebirth* keeps nostalgic longing alive while also providing the player the ability to muse on the critical role that absence plays in their desire.

Rebirth suggests that players' attempts to extinguish homesickness through nostalgic texts (whether of the past or just evoking it) is a necessary ruse to experience the homesickness they really enjoy. This means that, when analysing games that players return to, or which offer a sense of homecoming, it's important to note that it's the absence of home that's desired, and not desire's abatement.

BIO

Max Coombes, PhD, works at the University of Auckland, Waipapa Taumata Rau, New Zealand. His research is concerned with embodiment and the unheimlich, and the uncanny textuality of videogames.

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“We’re Friendly... Not Your Friends”: Balancing Brand Management and Authenticity in Gaming Podcasts

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Keywords

Gaming media, authenticity, parasocial relationships, gaming podcasts, content creation

INTRODUCTION

Gaming media is increasingly centred on the personalities involved (Ruberg & Lark, 2021; Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). From the rise of Twitch streamers and YouTube creators, to the myriad of voices present in gaming podcasts, the transition from the traditional access journalism¹ that dominated the sphere to a more fragmented ecosystem is well underway (Stanton & Johnson, 2024). This transition provides many opportunities for creators in this space, but it also raises many notable challenges. In particular, previous research has shown that working independently in the sphere leads to challenges in regards to funding; many creators are directly reliant on continued financial support from their audience as the main revenue source (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019). This presents a challenge for these creators, who must balance a potentially parasocial audience relationship with their desire to set clear personal boundaries between their work life and their personal life (Johnson, 2021). This can become even more complicated when creators also need to balance the expectations and desires of other stakeholders including advertisers or corporate partners they are collaborating with.

This paper argues that as part of this challenge, creators are forced to turn themselves into a brand; success and failure are often predicated on their ability to sell their personality and perspective as one which is appealing to the audiences they hope to court. This further exasperates the challenges that come with audience engagement, as audiences have specific expectations regarding the “brand” that creators have cultivated, and crave a certain level of authenticity from creators, even if they are capable of acknowledging that this authenticity is artificially created as part of the creators persona or “brand”. As a result, a challenge can arise between the creator’s need to balance an authentic brand and maintain personal boundaries. It is this challenge which this paper is predominantly focused on examining and explaining

To do so, it looks draws on interviews with over two dozen creators and surveys of 1,800 audience member to shed light on the differing strategies employed by these creators to navigate these tensions, as well as showcasing how the audience responds to these strategies. Three strategies emerged as common practices which creators used to manage these challenges: explicit boundary setting, monetising interaction, and “leaning in” – exaggerating the audience/creator relationship to a humorous

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degree. Each of these strategies is useful in different scenarios, and this presentation will outline the benefits and challenges associated with their uses. Particular attention will be given to comparing two case studies – *The MinnMax Podcast* and *Thumb Cramps*. While *MinnMax* provides a clear blueprint for how creators use boundary setting and monetisation to manage audience relationships, *Thumb Cramps* provides an extremely clear example of using humour to maintain a perception of authenticity and mask the monetary motivators which led to the show’s creation.

Previous scholars have emphasised the variety of off-camera and affective forms of labour which gaming media personalities engage with on platforms like Twitch, as well as the role that humour plays in creating a clear sense of community in the audiences of these creators. This presentation expands on this work, positioning the variety of methods of brand management showcased here as yet another aspect of the labour involved in this work and showcasing how these aspects of digital labour are also applicable to forms of gaming media beyond streaming through the case of gaming podcasts.

BIO

Dr Ryan Stanton is a sessional academic at the University of Sydney. His dissertation presented the first academic analysis of gaming podcasts, providing important insights into how creators and audiences engage with these podcasts, and how they are representative of a shift in how gaming media is produced. His work has been published in numerous journals including *Games and Culture* and he has presented on his findings at leading communications conferences including the *International Communications Association* conference in 2024.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

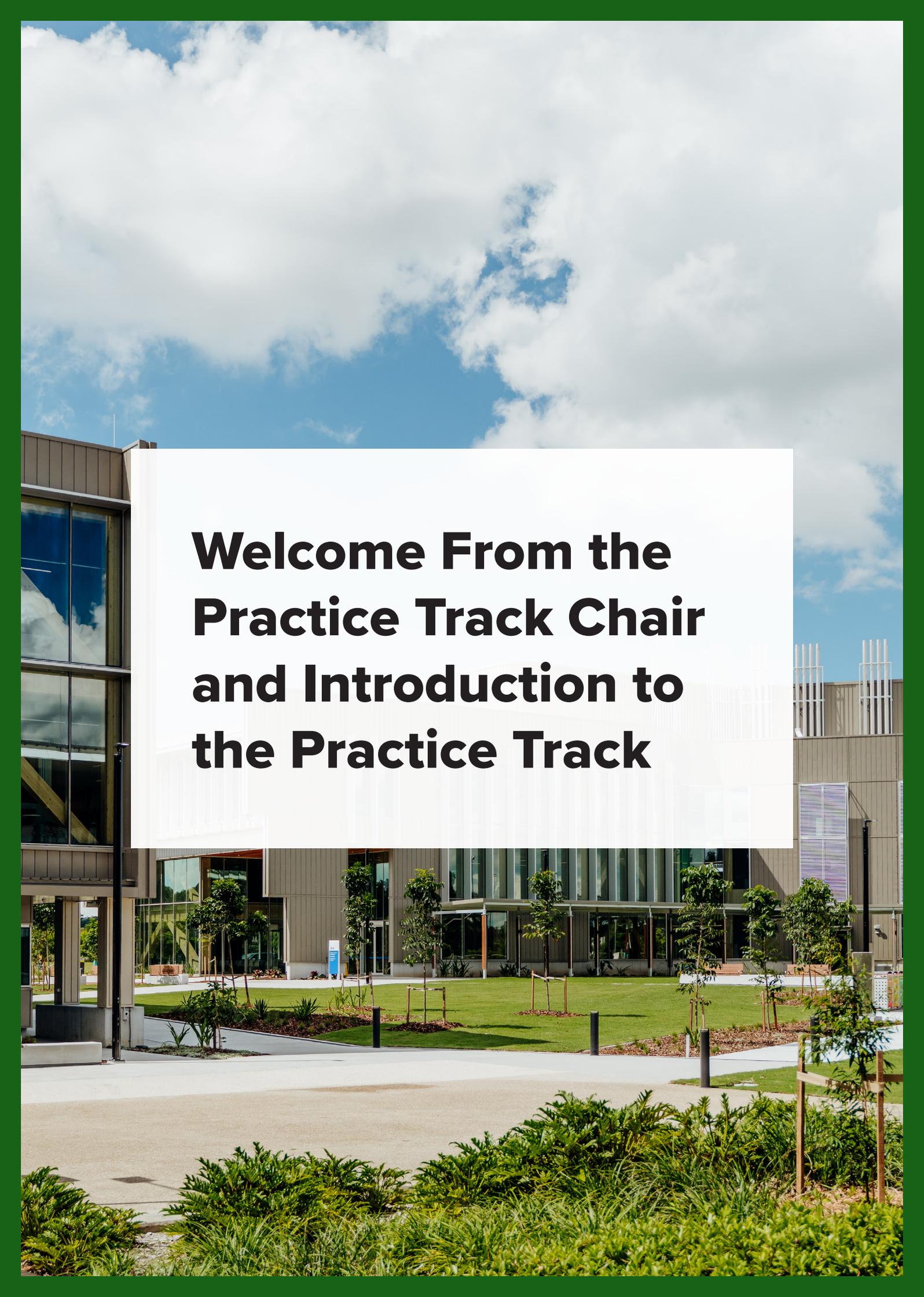
ENDNOTES

¹ A form of journalism in which journalists are more focused on maintaining a good relationship with their sources for continued exclusive stories rather than providing investigative reporting on them.

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Welcome From the Practice Track Chair and Introduction to the Practice Track



Introduction by Practice Track Chair

The DiGRAA 2026 practice track continues 2025's successful experimental games track, which introduced a non-traditional research outputs (NTROs) submission format. NTROs allow researchers to share their findings in innovative ways that resonate with both their fellow researchers and the general public and provoke new ways of thinking (Ismail, 2025). By expanding the scope of what is considered academic research, NTROs and the DiGRAA practice track by extension, create meaningful dialogue and a rich, multidimensional understanding of creative practice (Ismail, 2025).

This year's practice track seeks to integrate and highlight knowledge and research contained within creative work and highlight its relevance to the scholarly study of games. Differing from the extended abstract track, the practice track provides both researchers and game makers an avenue to share and disseminate their creative work and practices within a scholarly context, through live play sessions and short presentations. Work presented as part of the DiGRAA 2026 practice track displays diversity in perspectives towards games as a creative form, in their role, context and meaning. Through live showcases and discussions within a scholarly venue, we may unpack these layers of complexity that include, but are not limited to, topics of play, interaction, aesthetic representation, meta-text, and procedurality. In doing so, we may better articulate insights imbued within processes and practices and advance our understanding of creativity within the broader cultural and scholarly landscape.

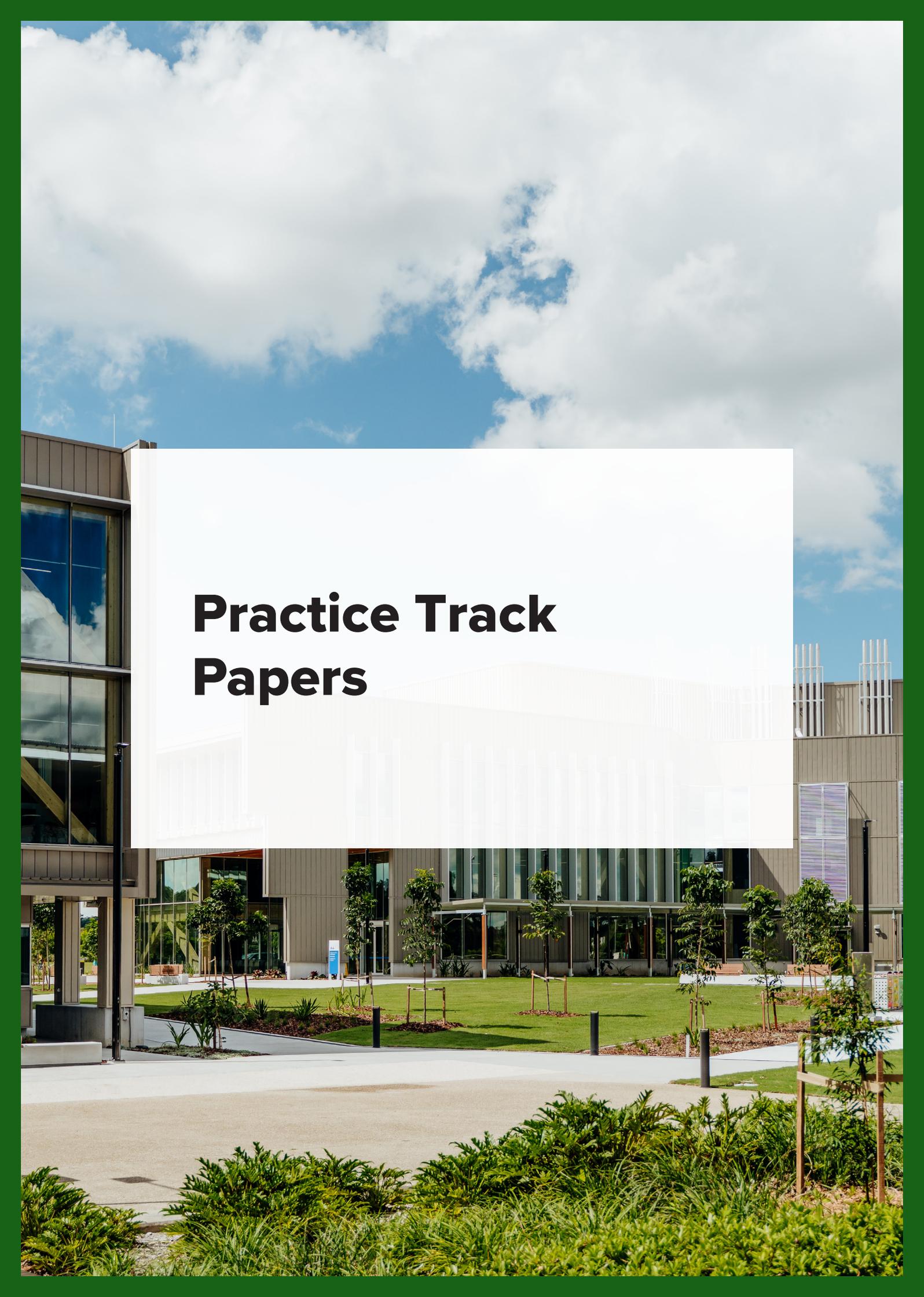
The winner of the DiGRAA 2026 best practice track work, *Dance Dance Deception* (Fourie, 2026), embodies these creative and scholarly values. The work merges phenomenological and queer studies with procedural aesthetics of game jank, exploring tensions in the expressive playful teasing of boundaries, and expectations and desires for goal-oriented structures. With its characterful dance competition framing and playful abstraction, *Dance Dance Deception* is a work that both entertains and provokes, as a thoughtfully designed scholarly work.

Dr Alexander Muscat
Lecturer, UniSC
DiGRAA Practice Track Chair
DiGRAA Board Member

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Practice Track Papers

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.



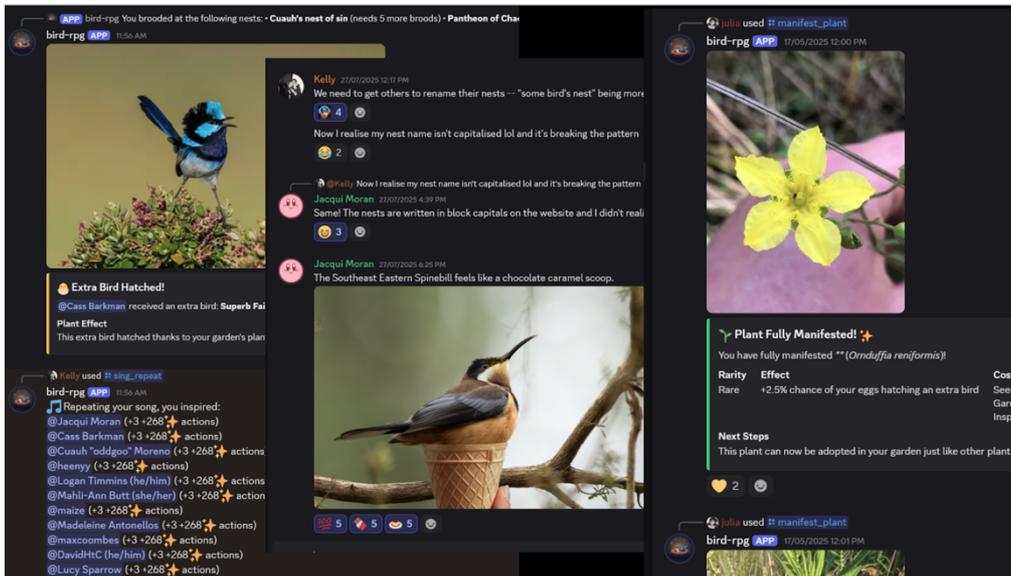
Contribution to field/industry: Cuauhtemoc Moreno is the lead facilitator of Bird-RPG. As a community-situated game, and again to reject the “god-trick”, I am mindful of not using a phrasing that would evoke a feeling of “the sole game designer”.

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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Translating Folktales into Interactive Media through the Game Adaptation of “Fragrant Water”

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Keywords

Interactive storytelling, natural malleability, Javanese folktale, virtual heritage, digital cultural preservation, player agency, game narrative

Format of work

Game Prototype

DESCRIPTION OF WORK

Fragrant Water (Hamijaya 2025) is an interactive story game inspired by the Javanese folktale *Asal Usul Banyuwangi*. The game reimagines the story through branching narrative paths, allowing players to step into the life of Sylo and make choices that test the tension between honor and loyalty. These decisions lead to one of three possible endings, highlighting the natural malleability of folklore. Developed in Unity using the Adventure Creator pack, *Fragrant Water* is designed for PC with a playtime of 10–15 minutes for the first playthrough. Its primary mechanic is an intuitive Point-and-Click system, ensuring accessibility while keeping the focus on story progression and narrative consequence. By combining simple interaction with layered narrative consequences, the game invites players to engage with cultural storytelling in an active and meaningful way.

Trailer: <https://youtu.be/jLMXy5mgVK8>

Demo: <https://reilivia.itch.io/fragrant-water>

RESEARCH STATEMENT

Background: The adaptation of folktales for contemporary audiences in Indonesia has been widely explored through moving image media such as film, drama, animation, and television dramas, with MD Entertainment (2023) alone producing 54 folktale-based dramas.¹ Consequently, the use of interactive media and games in folktale adaptation in Indonesia remains underexplored, highlighting a gap in engagement with complex media forms. Angelaki (2024) suggested that the approach to converting folktales into games is similar to literary and film narratives due to the authorial narrative nature of video games.² However, Koenitz (2010) challenges this assumption by claiming that the framework fails to consider the role of the interactive digital system that underpins the narrative's production.³ This raises questions about how interactive storytelling utilizes the unique affordances of games to translate the authentic retelling of a Javanese folktale. This paper aims to approach folktale adaptation into interactive media through practice-based research to examine the authenticity in digital culture heritage through the natural malleability of folktale during

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the production of *Fragrant Water* game. The work contributes to the ongoing discussion of folktale translation into interactive media to support cultural continuity and provide an exemplary framework for future design in adapting tradition-based narratives.

Contribution to field/industry: The development of *Fragrant Water* game is a part of practice-based research⁴ on folktale translation through the lens of a game designer. Unlike the folktale-based games in the market, *Fragrant Water* took the adaptation further to explore the nature of folktales through the affordance of game as an interactive media. This exploration of narrative frameworks and the capability of interactive storytelling in creating a "what if" scenario is similar to the nature of folklore that evolves through word of mouth. The malleability of folktales can be reflected through the flexibility of branching mechanics in interactive narrative. Through its adaptation of *Asal Usul Banyuwangi* the *Fragrant Water* game exemplifies how to translate folktales into interactive media and provides a fresh framework. This framework emphasizes how digital game designers can effectively integrate culturally significant folktales into interactive narratives by maintaining cultural authenticity, providing meaningful player agency, and balancing mechanics with narrative progression. It proposes a model where games are not just tools for entertainment, but also for preserving and evolving traditional storytelling forms in a contemporary context, contributing to the growing practice of folktale game adaptation in Southeast Asia.

Significance: This work demonstrates how video games can serve as a form of digital cultural heritage that preserves and reimagines folktales through interactive design. By integrating the natural malleability of folklore into branching narrative structures, *Fragrant Water* proposes a framework for adaptation that emphasizes cultural authenticity while embracing the possibilities of player agency. Within an Australian context, these findings can be utilized as an exemplary approach, as Australia holds rich traditions of folklore, ranging from Indigenous storytelling to migrant cultural narratives. The use of video games as a medium, with branching narratives and player-driven play styles, highlights the importance of interactivity in reflecting how stories shift and evolve across generations.

EXHIBITION

The game will be displayed on a monitor with a mouse and headphones. The player will have to sit down and navigate through the game using mouse while listening to the sound for narrative immersion. The game will be a PC build and does not require internet connection to run.

BIO

Rebecca Livia Hamijaya is an Indonesian interactive designer based in Melbourne. With a background in digital media, her practice covers 3D environment design, web design, interactive design, and user experience. Her interest in user research informs her approach of connecting interactive experiences with narrative storytelling, emphasizing how design can shape meaning through player engagement. *Fragrant Water*, her adaptation of a Javanese folktale into an interactive story game, forms part of her major project as a Master of Animation, Games and Interactivity candidate at RMIT University. Her work explores the intersection of culture, narrative, and interactive media.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project and research were undertaken as part of the Master of Animation, Games and Interactivity program at RMIT University. The development and research stages

were supervised by Carlo Tolentino, Chris Barker, and Jeremy Parker. Special thanks are extended to Kate Cawley and Nicholas Kallincos for their constructive feedback on the visual development. Acknowledgement is also given to the MAGI cohort for their support through feedback and playtesting. Additional thanks go to Luong Quy, Santino, Julian, and Sergio for their contributions to the development stage as character and sound designers.

ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

Endnotes

¹ MD entertainment is a prime example of how Indonesian folktales are often adapted for screen, emphasizing the lack of engagement with complex media.

² The literature review written by Angelaki in 2010 shows a conflicting view with this research despite discussing the same topic, folktale adaptation in game.

³ Koenitz's idea is introduced to challenge the linear narrative framework and brought up the affordance of interactive media.

⁴ This research draws from Linda Candy's (2006) *Practice-Based Research* methodology, which positions creative practice as both the process and outcome of research

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Exploring Non-Human Embodied Perspectives through Gesture-Based Player Agency in Virtual Reality Games

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Keywords

virtual reality, exploration games, embodied perspective, non-human ontology, gestural interaction, player agency, player perception

Format of work

Game prototype

DESCRIPTION OF WORK

Liminal is a gesture-based exploratory VR game that invites players to embody beings beyond the human. It is made with Unity using XR Interaction Toolkit package. It can run natively on standalone headsets (Meta Quest 2/3 or similar) or via PC connection. This single-player VR experience positions the player in a fixed location, with interactions occasionally requiring expansive arm movements. The overall control scheme combines button input and gestural interactions.

In the first level, the player embodies a gigantic cosmic entity. They can grab and throw planets using the controller's grab button or open their arms wide to alter the movement of comets. In the second level, the player becomes the sky, controlling the weather, day, and night by squeezing rainclouds or dragging the sun and moon. As the game progresses, the player transforms into an insect and flies through a garden by flapping their arms. Later, they shrink even further into plankton, reaching out to interact with other plankton to light up the sea. In the final stage, the player teleports into their own consciousness, swimming through their mind with outward circular arm movements resembling breaststroke.

Playthrough Video: <https://youtu.be/4wdYeQpQWrA>

itch.io Link: <https://kora-lee.itch.io/liminal>

RESEARCH STATEMENT

This research studies how gesture-based player agency in exploratory virtual reality (VR) games facilitates embodied non-human perspectives. Current VR design emphasises visual immersion in human-centred, action-oriented experiences. This study explores VR's potential for non-anthropocentric game design through practice-based research. *Liminal*, a VR exploratory game, is developed to immerse players in roles with varying levels of agency and empowerment to highlight interconnectedness of all existence. Gestural interactions reflect players' physical form through body

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expansiveness and effort. This research proposes a framework for non-human embodiment and dynamic perspective to diversify VR genres. Body control offers insights into natural human-computer interaction, immersive installation, and interactive design to enhance cognitive immersion. Ideologically, the emphasis on biocentrism fosters inclusivity, empathy, and companionship with the world.

Non-Human Embodiment

Liminal invites players to embody diverse non-human entities and challenges anthropocentric perspectives. Inspired by Daoist philosophy, which sees the world as a dynamic system of mutual inclusion (Chen et al. 2012), and Alan Watts' notion that humans cannot understand the world from a separate self perspective (Watts 1966), this research studies the fluidity of perspective by reflecting on identity and agency to deliver ideas about cosmic insignificance, biocentrism, and non-human ontology.

Perceived scale of virtual environment is influenced by avatar body size (van der Hoort, Guterstam, Ehrsson, 2011). Humans experience environments from a fixed size and with agency proportional to our bodies. Altering players' perceived scale and empowerment may foster non-human embodiment, allowing them to explore perspectives where human norms of dominance, vulnerability, and spatial orientation no longer apply, thereby encouraging empathetic connections to other life forms.

Practice-based research method is adopted to investigate how gesture-based player agency achieves non-human embodiment in *Liminal*. Embodied experiences involving physical movement and gesture facilitate deeper internalisation of ideas (Lin et al. 2024). Gestures are designed based on physical form and effort, with corresponding feedback to reinforce perceived power. Player begins as a vast cosmic entity in the universe and gradually shrinks, descending through the Earth as an insect and eventually becoming plankton in the sea. In the final consciousness world, power becomes relative as the intangible mind is not constrained by physical attributes. Unlike traditional design that increasingly empowers players (Pöhlmann, 2024, p. 336), *Liminal* reduces player's form to foster humility and challenge human supremacy.

Gesture Interaction Design and Player Agency

Gestures are designed based on power pose theory (Carney et al. 2010) and Labanotation developed by Rudolf Laban. Expansive, effortless postures signal high power, while closed, strenuous postures imply low power (Tiedens and Fragale 2003). Player agency and feedback further shape perception. The effort required to influence the world and the resulting impact reinforce embodiment and perceived power.

When embodying the cosmos in *Liminal*, player is empowered to simply open their arms to alter the comets' movement. In contrast, the garden stage interactions require higher physical effort to flap the arms to fly (Figure 1). Flapping intensity is calculated using controller velocity data to produce a responsive flying speed. Flight direction is determined by flattening and normalising the headset's forward vector, enabling players to fly naturally toward where they look. In the final stage, player swims through their consciousness (Figure 2). Swimming is detected by signed angles between sequential hand positions, resembling breaststroke for a relaxing and exploratory experience.



Figure 1: Player is flapping their arms to fly.

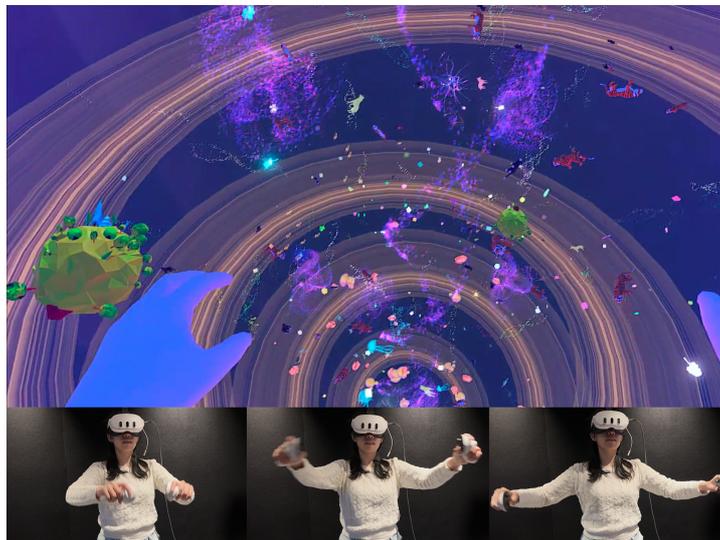


Figure 2: Player is pushing hands outward to swim.

Game Environmental Design and Awe

When confronting entities greater than oneself, awe arises and self-importance diminishes. Situating players beneath colossal beings or landscapes leads to the realisation of being part of a greater whole (Ke and Yoon 2020). Conversely, a higher spatial position is cognitively associated with social dominance (Meng et al. 2019). In *Liminal*, player's position and perspective are designed to provide a clear, elevated view of the environment when embodying large entities. As the player shrinks, their viewpoint lowers, and surrounding objects appear colossal. The distant background elements are scaled to emphasise the player's reduced size. Position and perspective can be used to manipulate perceptions of scale and power.

Conclusion

VR offers potential for immersive, embodied experiences, yet most game design focuses on human-centred paradigms with individualism ingrained (Pöhlmann 2024). Non-human perspectives remain underexplored. *Liminal* manipulates player agency, sense of scale and power for non-human embodiment. The presence of high-power entities induces awe. Gesture-based agency further shapes power and autonomy through body expansiveness and effort. The avatar roles, level of empowerment, and

player experience should be considered in gesture design. Although player's self-identity in *Liminal* is not fully defined and may involve embodying abstract existences without a physical body, identity emerges through interactions with the environment. Future studies can explore avatar body design to support non-human embodiment. *Liminal* seeks to foster environmental awareness and social understanding, broadening VR's scope by promoting empathetic engagement beyond conventional genres. The proposed framework offers interdisciplinary applications in human-computer interaction, immersive installation, and interactive design, particularly in creating experiences that transcend human-centric paradigms.

EXHIBITION

The setup consists of a standalone VR headset (Meta Quest 2/3 or similar), with the game prototype pre-installed and running natively on the device. As *Liminal* is a single-player game, an external monitor (preferably 43" or larger) is recommended to mirror the in-headset view in real time, allowing viewers to observe the player's interaction and perspective. The in-headset view will be cast wirelessly to a laptop via a standard Wi-Fi connection, with the laptop then connected to the monitor through HDMI. A table is preferred for placing the headset, printed materials, and miscellaneous items. During the gameplay, the player remains in a fixed position, but sometimes needs to open their arms wide or reach out with their hands during interactions. For safety, a play area of approximately 3 × 3 meters is recommended to minimise the risk of accidentally hitting nearby objects or furniture.

BIO

Ka Kei Lee (Kora) is a Hong Kong game designer, animator, and illustrator based in Melbourne. While completing her Master of Animation, Games and Interactivity at RMIT, she focuses on storytelling, creative mechanics, immersive experiences, and has a strong versatility across game and animation production. She is the producer and programmer of *Liminal*, a VR game where players embody non-human beings to explore cosmic insignificance through gesture-based interactions. Eager to push her boundaries, she enjoys collaborating across disciplines and exploring new technologies.

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Dance Dance Deception

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Keywords

dance, animation, queer, cursed, jank

Format of work

A PC game with X-box style controller input.

DESCRIPTION OF WORK

Dance Dance Deception is a dance simulator game. A group of ravers are preparing for “Rumble at the Rave”, to compete and win a dance competition. They discover however that a curse is spreading, which is causing glitches and unexpected results. The gameplay is like a simplified animation machine, the main gameplay loop lets players compose dances, a progressively build a sequence of dances. This is a game played on PC using a controller. Players also must contend with the game itself becoming cursed, which they can control and fix through minigames, or can embrace to see what happens when the rave demon takes over...

Link to playthrough example: <https://youtu.be/B5sP0GyrHIs>

RESEARCH STATEMENT

Background:

Queer thinking that informed my approach for this project, was ideas put forth by Halberstam (2011), who promotes counterintuitive approaches like messiness, stupidity and failure as radical queer tools for resistance. Ahmed (2006) also provides a uniquely queer take on phenomenology, relating orientation towards object to queer experience and elaborating on disorientation and reorientation as vital experiences.

Writers like Keogh (2018) elaborate on the phenomena of player bodies intermingling with digital game worlds, focusing specifically on embodiment. Keogh asks: “How does our embodied sense of perception constitute—and become constituted by—the phenomenon of videogame play?” He points out that phenomenology is a useful tool as it asks us to become aware of things that are usually in our perceptual background.

To bring all these ideas together, I aimed to develop critical tools and methods, drawing from theories of play that overlap with related approaches from queer studies. Ruberg and Shaw (2017) define queer games studies as “...not so much to the specific topic of queerness in games as to the application of a set of critical tools derived from queer theory and queer thinking” This articulates the approach I tried to follow. Also, while a lot of discussions are about games as artifacts or the playing of games, I extend these approaches to include the making of games and queer playful interactions with software.

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Shmalzer (2020) proposes that jank disrupts the illusion of seamless control and disembodied immersion. Shmalzer argues that such messiness, disruption and odd embodiment can challenge dominant gaming conventions. Shmalzer only discusses jank in relation to control schemes but there are other possibilities for using jank to disrupt conventions of play (Barkman 2021).

Contribution:

This research was practice based; I worked to build on existing ideas from the field of queer game studies through a process of creative experimentation. As my research specifically focuses on experimental interactions with digital media, this kind of practice-based approach proved to be most fruitful. My hope is that this research can serve as useful reference for other academic research that can build on examples of these ideas put into practice, as well as providing some tools for other practitioners interested in experimental approaches to game-making or digital art.

Significance:

The game is an analogy for gate-keeping and exclusionary culture that often perpetuates ways of playing by bros for bros. The core idea is that forms of play can be more diverse and celebrate messiness, unskilled fooling around, enjoying entangled software-human queer expressivity (as opposed to dominating the machine/ beating the game). The game absurdly demands a skillful performance, to compete and win, to control and “straighten out” the odd behaviour of things. While this is a valid way to play the game, it can be exciting for players to explore all the other possibilities and weird results that are possible when embracing the curse of the rave demon.

EXHIBITION

The game can be played on any PC/laptop, using an X-box controller (both of which I am able to provide.)

BIO

Lou Fourie is a Melbourne based digital artist, game maker and academic. They have recently finished their Masters of Animation, Games and Interactive Media at RMIT university. They have previously presented at Freeplay Angles Festival (2024), DIGRAA (2025), and upcoming Queerness and Games Conference (2025).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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A Lacanian TTRPG where you are always playing

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Keywords

Participatory surveillance, Recognition, Lacan, Gaze, TTRPG, playing cards

Format of work

Game prototype played with a single deck of playing cards, pencils and note cards.

DESCRIPTION OF WORK

This is an experimental TTRPG played with a single deck of standard playing cards, pencils, and copious note cards. It requires a table to play around. Each player has a hand of playing cards. When someone makes a skill check each other player (and GM) is asked the question ‘do you believe the character will succeed?’ and votes by playing a card face down and revealing simultaneously. Majority Reds = success, Majority Blacks = fail, Tie = partial success.

When you guess with the majority you add your playing card to a long-term project. Examples can be “Find my long lost brother: ♥♥♠♠” or “Prepare to cast fireball: ♣♥♦♠”. Once you fulfill the requirements of your project you can cast whatever spell you’ve prepared, learn whatever information you’re trying to gather, or whatever else you were preparing to do.

The purpose of the game is to create a TTRPG experience where everyone is playing, where the rules are light but robust, and where players feel as if their roleplaying performance is constantly subject to the gaze of others.

RESEARCH STATEMENT

Why do we play TTRPG games in groups? This practice leads to games that Conway describes as having a poor ‘fun coefficient’ (Conway, Personal Correspondence, July 2025). Much time is spent passively watching as other players labouriously take their turn, with players spending at most 25% of the time in the spotlight (assuming a game with four players).

Solo TTRPGs exist, as do games designed for one Game Master and a single player. Nonetheless, such games are primarily played in groups despite the various issues latent in such games. From the GM scarcity crisis, through to the sheer difficulty in scheduling, why do we insist on playing these games in big groups?

My as-yet unnamed game makes the argument that part of the reason we play games in groups is because we do not merely wish to roleplay, but we wish to roleplay within the gaze of the other. Much of Jacques Lacan’s work focuses on the psychoanalytic importance of the ‘gaze’, wherein by being watched we come to perceive and interpret ourselves through the gaze of the other (Lacan, 1973). Hegel too places importance on

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the notion of ‘recognition’, on the value of being recognised by another autonomous independent mind (Hegel, 1807). Albrechtslund (2008) also, in his research on social media performances notes the importance of ‘participatory surveillance’, on the gratifying experience of not only performing but to perform in a way that allows one to be seen within that performance. If a Barbarian rages and there’s nobody there to see it, did they really rage at all?

To address this my game incorporates the gaze into skill checks. Instead of simulating a game world through complex, time consuming math; skill checks are instead a fuzzy tabletop consensus. You are constantly watching and being watched when you play, generating a game that leans into the very aspect that causes players to roleplay in big groups.

EXHIBITION

This work is interacted with by sitting at a dedicated table. I will serve as a Game Master. Players use playing cards, pencils and note cards (all of which I will provide myself). This is a TTRPG experience.

BIO

Antranig Sarian is a board game developer with Bigger Worlds Games. His narrative-heavy board game *Courtroom Mysteries* will have a public Kickstarter launch on January 2026. Sarian has previously finished a doctorate at Swinburne University of Technology with his thesis titled *Endings and Alignments* which looks at morality meters and reputation systems as a form of quantified self. He has previously done narrative design work for the mobile game *Loveverse* and has published papers in *Games and Culture*, *Eludamos* and *The Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*.

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Pipeline Protocol Prototype

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Keywords

game development, production phases, visual hierarchy, visual design, educational design, prototype

Format of work

A browser-based game prototype designed to run on any standard desktop computer (PC or Mac) and played through mouse and keyboard.

DESCRIPTION OF WORK

Pipeline Protocol is a browser-based educational game prototype developed in Unity. Designed to run on any standard desktop computer with mouse and keyboard, it can be completed in 5–10 minutes. *Pipeline Protocol* takes the form of a vertical shooter genre, a well-established game genre that provides a clear and familiar structure for progression. Players advance by collecting pickups that represent stages of the traditional game production pipeline. Each pickup introduces a principle of visual hierarchy, such as motion, colour, or contrast, while simultaneously unlocking a corresponding phase of development. For example, early pickups highlight functionality and greyboxing, while later stages focus on refinement, polish, and release. The initial release of *Pipeline Protocol* will be deployed on itch.io as an open-source project.

RESEARCH STATEMENT

Understanding the game production pipeline can be a challenge for students new to game development. Industry and educational sources describe the pipeline as a sequence of distinct stages including pre-production, production, alpha, beta, polish, gold, launch, and post launch (Chandler 2009, Fullerton 2024, Schell 2008, Macklin and Sharp 2016). Although these terms are widely recognised, they often remain abstract for beginners who lack lived production experience. Students frequently conflate stages or misunderstand their purpose, for example confusing prototype with alpha or assuming polish and gold mean the same thing. This lack of clarity undermines their ability to plan effectively, manage scope, and reflect on their projects. While textbooks provide clear descriptions, production pipelines are iterative and layered, making it difficult to communicate through static instruction alone. Students particularly struggle to understand how the conceptual terminology connects with the tangible progress of functionality and assets, which makes it harder to apply the concepts in practice. Addressing this challenge requires an approach that goes beyond definition and instead creates opportunities for students to experience production as an ordered system. While creating order within an iterative process may appear counter-intuitive, the purpose is not to impose rigid linearity but to support understanding of the distinct stages and how they interact within the broader cycle of development.

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Pipeline Protocol addresses this gap by framing the production pipeline through the logic of visual hierarchy. Visual hierarchy, drawing on Gestalt principles, refers to the arrangement of design elements so that their relative importance is clear, guiding perception and establishing order. It focuses on the core elements of size, colour, contrast, alignment, proximity, shape, texture, and motion, which operate together to direct attention and meaning (Lupton and Phillips 2015, 115-123, Figma n.d., Philips and Chapman 2019). Instead of presenting development stages as fixed definitions, the prototype connects each phase to a principle of visual hierarchy. Progression unfolds through the collection of pickups, with each one triggering a change in the game state. When a pickup is obtained, the environment shifts to reflect the corresponding phase of development and the relevant guiding principles (as seen in figure 1). This change in state is accompanied by a short text that explains both the stage of production and the visual rules at play. This creates a natural flow where visual change reinforces conceptual understanding, allowing students to see how production processes and design principles operate in tandem. In this way, specialised terminology becomes a sequence of interactive lessons, with each stage clarifying not only the pipeline but also the design considerations and principles that shape its hierarchy.



Figure 1: Screenshots of Pipeline Protocols Progression

The project also contributes through its choice of format. *Pipeline Protocol* takes the form of a vertical shooter, a genre with deep historical roots in arcade and console traditions (Wolf 2002, Kent 2001). The sequential nature of this genre provides a natural alignment with production phases, while its simplicity ensures accessibility even for players with limited prior game literacy or experience. Furthermore, the project is deliberately positioned as an open-source, iterative work. The initial release on itch.io will serve as a foundation to be adapted over time in response to feedback from educators, industry practitioners, and students. This iterative model mirrors the very pipeline the game seeks to teach, demonstrating that development is an ongoing process shaped by collaboration and reflection.

The significance of *Pipeline Protocol* is that it reconceptualises the production pipeline as a playable system, where students encounter development not through static description but through interactive progression. Its originality lies in the mapping of visual hierarchy principles onto production phases, which provides clear and actionable changes to the game state that supplement the evolving stages of development. This alignment enables learners to perceive the production pipeline as a coherent flow, where each phase is both visually and conceptually reinforced through play. By embedding visual hierarchy into the experience, the project reduces the abstraction of production knowledge and offers students a scaffolded, confidence-building entry point into complex material. For educators, *Pipeline Protocol* demonstrates how game-based

approaches can make theoretical processes accessible, tangible, and reflective, positioning play as a powerful method for engaging with the structure of game development.

EXHIBITION

The ideal exhibition setup for *Pipeline Protocol* is a desktop computer with a standard monitor, keyboard, and mouse. The game will be hosted on itch.io as a browser-based prototype, which removes the need for installation but requires an internet connection to access. Interaction will be supported by clear on-screen prompts, along with a concise A5 handout that introduces the project and outlines its purpose. The installation is intended for short, self-directed play sessions, enabling attendees to engage with the prototype independently or while observing others at the station.

BIO

Dr Joel Bennett is a Lecturer in Digital Media and Game Development at the University of Canberra. His research investigates game development practices, production processes, and creative pedagogy. Joel's work includes a practice-based focus on how emerging technologies shape design and education, alongside an interest in the cultural history and preservation of games in Australia.

Rik (Richard) Lagarto is a Lecturer in Digital Media, Game Development, and Creative Writing at the University of Canberra. Before moving full-time into academia, Rik spent 20 years in game development as a game designer, narrative designer and game writer. His research focuses on digital storytelling, and he is currently completing a PhD that explores the use of AI as a collaborative tool in the creation of steampunk narratives. The project examines how themes of postcolonialism, gender and class can be critically engaged while ensuring that human authorship remains central to the creative process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thick Aesthetics in Artist Game *Fantastic STIs 18 to 81*

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Keywords

Queer game design, Thick aesthetics, STI and HIV representation, Personal narrative in gameplay, Cultural identity in games

Format of work

A web-based game: <https://ffmaer.itch.io/fantastic>

DESCRIPTION OF WORK

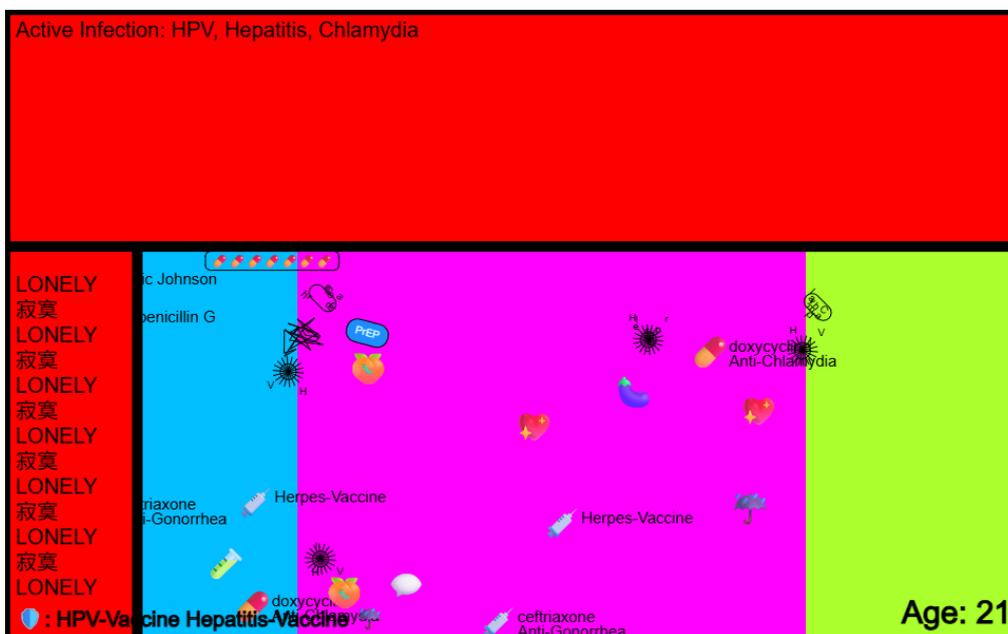


Figure 1: A screenshot of the game in action

Fantastic STIs 18 to 81 is a game that explores love, loneliness, and STI threats, mirroring real-world science and social issues, including the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Players navigate an 18-year-old's life, with each year offering chances for love and sex, symbolized by hearts, peaches, and eggplants. The game also features symbols for viruses/bacteria; syringes, condoms, test tubes, chat bubbles, and pills; and swimmers/candle lights representing HIV-positive celebrities (e.g., Freddie Mercury) and organizations like ACT UP that fought the virus. Players control a chaotic, shifting-line character using ASDW keys, a familiar keyboard setup. Developed with JavaScript, this web-based game is portable, lightweight, accessible, and easy to archive. Created by me, a self-funded, solo, brown queer, generative artist, the game utilizes only emojis and code-generated visuals, reflecting an algorithist aesthetic (Verostko 1994). This mirrors many queer indie games: small-scale, low-budget,

politically and passionately driven, prioritizing artistic freedom and niche topics over commercial success (Ruberg 2022).

Gameplay video: <https://youtu.be/T9TBg47c1YI>

RESEARCH STATEMENT

John Sharp's *Works of Game* explores thick aesthetics in video games by “[taking] into account the work’s place in more complex cultural contexts (Sharp 2015, 77).” This paper examines how *Fantastic STIs 18 to 81* exemplifies these layered meanings.

Thick Aesthetics in Game Mechanisms

Like "bullet hell" games, the goal is survival, not defeating a boss, aiming to reach age 81 without excessive STIs or extreme loneliness. The artist created two game-losing mechanisms linked to these real-life misfortunes. This capacity to imbue new game mechanics with meaning signifies "a sophisticated understanding of what can be created through a given medium (Sharp 2015, 77)." Such an understanding is essential for an artist aiming to craft a game possessing "thick aesthetics."

Increased STI infection reduces player vision and increases the likelihood of losing, simulating disease burden. Loneliness is also powerfully highlighted; this losing condition prompts players to collide with hearts, peaches, and eggplants to restore vision, mirroring how loneliness drives people to seek relationships. Losing due to excessive loneliness symbolizes "the end of loneliness" or the end of life, referencing the Buddhist concept of Parinirvāṇa (Tanaka 2017).



Figure 2: The game ends due to extreme loneliness.

As Figure 2 shows, the screen turns red with "LONELY," "THE END OF LONELINESS," and their Chinese characters in capital letters. The repetition of "LONELY" emphasizes ongoing suffering, while the black-red palette suggests the deadly nature of loneliness. At this point, vivid colors fade, interactivity ceases, and a static visual takes over. This profound moment, a result of deliberate choices, embodies "a criticality and a conceptual rigor" (Sharp 2015, 78), contributing to the game's "thick aesthetics."

Thick Aesthetics in Identity & Culture Awareness

As the player swims towards an old age, they encounter well-known HIV+ people who have completed their journeys, along with the names of organizations and individuals who fought against the HIV pandemic. This signals that navigating love and loneliness amidst STIs may seem solitary, but it is a journey shared by many and has marks in the culture.

Although the game is primarily in English, it features a repeating Chinese word 寂寞, which means loneliness. This adds a decorative element of mystery for non-Chinese players, but its primary goal is to highlight the artist's cultural identity. It points to the overarching theme of his art practice: exploring the intersection of two identities—being gay and Chinese. Furthermore, the artist contributed his voice to create sound effects, adding a personal touch to the game's sonic aesthetic.

Thick Aesthetics in Design Details

Thick aesthetics of *Fantastic STIs 18 to 81* come from its charming small design details that “[grounds it] in the more nuanced realm of experience” (Sharp 2015, 77). For instance, starting a conversation about STIs or undergoing STI tests—scenarios that can be awkward and challenging in real life—are represented within the game. When the player collides with the text bubbles or test tubes, and if there are hidden worms, representing STIs, in the eggplants or peaches, the worms will reveal themselves inside the peaches or eggplants after a few seconds.

Accidental contact with HIV triggers a 10-second countdown. Reaching PEP pills in time prevents HIV infection; otherwise, the player becomes infected. This mimics the real-life urgency of seeking PEP after unsafe sex, reflecting the ongoing anxiety and critical need to end the HIV pandemic, even though its peak is past.

Thick Aesthetics in the Meaning of Play

The topic of STIs, especially HIV, is serious and socially sensitive. In light of this seriousness, a lively game has been created to boost people's confidence and encourage them to confront the virus, bacteria, and stigma with courage. If the player can see threats as challenges in a game with a playful spirit, they are on a path to becoming invincible. Playing in *Fantastic STIs 18 to 81* is not trivializing a serious topic or making mindless fun out of a dire situation, but rather instilling a fighter's bravery in the hearts of the players. The role of play, “one of the important aspects of thick aesthetics in games and art (Sharp 2015, 81),” is monumental in *Fantastic STIs 18 to 81*, making the game's aesthetics sophisticated and, therefore, thick.

Significance

This avant-garde queer game, created by an individual fine artist, explores a minority group's experience with STIs. It showcases a sophisticated understanding of the medium, imbuing deep meaning into play and game mechanisms, creating a nuanced experience. The design is rich with personal identity and cultural awareness, exemplifying "thick aesthetics."

EXHIBITION

The work, accessible through the URL fmaer.itch.io/fantastic, will be displayed full-screen on a laptop with Wi-Fi. Audiences can interact with the work using the keyboard of the laptop computer. The laptop computer will be placed on a table, with two chairs provided for seating. Sound will emit from the laptop speakers. A solo game, but better as a duet. An additional player observing the infection status can verbally assist the main player, creating a social gaming experience.

BIO

TengChao (TC) Zhou is a PhD researcher at Monash Art, Design & Architecture and SensiLab. His research intersects video games, fine arts, queer theory, and generative AI. This paper is part of his ongoing PhD work on how artists incorporate broader cultural contexts, personal identities, narrative, and game mechanisms into the meaning of video games, creating thick aesthetics with video games.

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