

# ANALOG GAME STUDIES

VOLUME 2

EDITED BY:

EVAN TORNER,  
EMMA LEIGH WALDRON, &  
AARON TRAMMELL





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## VOLUME II

EVAN TORNER, EMMA LEIGH WALDRON,  
AARON TRAMMELL (EDS.)

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## Foreword

As a caterpillar emerges from a cocoon as a butterfly, so do we still express childlike wonder when our own creations take on a life of their own. And although we Co-Editors of *Analog Game Studies* are not butterfly collectors, it is safe to say that we have become fond of our collective creation. 2015 marks the year when *Analog Game Studies* transformed into its own entity, a publication both expressive of our academic and para-academic interests, as well as a platform for important discussions above and beyond ourselves to unfold and develop.

Volume II contains numerous essays that we feel will resonate for years to come. For one thing, thanks to the guest editorship of James Hodges, we entered into conversation with digital games and participatory media. *Foursquare*, *Currency*, and cocktail cabinets all sound like they would ordinarily grace the pages of a scholarly journal on video games, but their inclusion here is a statement regarding how the analog *informs* the digital without question. If 2016's wild digital breakout hit *Pokémon Go* was not conceivable without *Ingress*, then *Analog Game Studies* demonstrated that *Ingress* was not conceivable without co-created knowledge about non-digital urban space. Moreover, the volume marks the beginning of an earnest engagement with race and colonialism in board games, exemplified in Bruno Faidutti's landmark essay "Postcolonial Catan" included within these pages. In the midst of the worldwide board-game renaissance, our authors remind us of the medium's remarkable naiveté with respect to geopolitics and interpersonal sensitivity. Finally, our now-established engagement with role-playing games took us to uncharted terrain, with serious examinations of queerness, gender politics, theatricality, genre, and experiential possibilities through RPGs. The journal prompted and shifted discussions on how we can interpret analog games within larger frameworks of social meaning.

Our division of chapters proves more medium-specific this year. The section "Card and Cardboard" covers various frames of reference for looking at board and card games, from education to queer theory. It is followed by two sections on role-playing games: "Pen and Paper" and "Live Action." Thanks to increasing interest on the relationship of analog games to performance, Volume II has a whole section devoted to "Theater," and then to the "New Spaces" in which one finds analog play. The volume concludes with "Interviews," our chance to have a word with some erudite game designers on topics of interest.



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Looking back, we see Volume II as a tipping point, both in terms of a rise in general traffic on our site ([analoggamestudies.org](http://analoggamestudies.org)), as well as in terms of key stakeholders in the broader games community choosing to locate discussions with us. We only hope to see this publication continue to be a nexus of different viewpoints in the field as the non-digital continues to pick up steam as a force to be reckoned with alongside the digital.

–The Editors

# Cards and Cardboard



# Postcolonial Catan

Bruno Faidutti

*I would rather discover one truth than gain a kingdom in Persia.*

–Democritus

*In Fact, the whole of Japan is a pure invention.* –Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying*, 1899

*The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.* –Leslie Poles Hartley, *The Go-Between*, 1953

*It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated.* –Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 1991

I am not a scholar, though I considered becoming one at some time and, twenty years ago, wrote my PhD about the discussion on the reality and the image of the unicorn from the late middle-ages to the XIXth century. Then I gave up historical research to spend more time designing boardgames, of the kind now called Eurogames. I incidentally read Edward Said's *Orientalism*<sup>1</sup> and *Culture and Imperialism*<sup>2</sup>. in 2012 or 2013, long after they had been published, and was immediately stricken by his description of orientalism, because it was a beast I had already encountered twice. In the true and false travel stories from the late middle-ages and the Renaissance—Ludovico Barthema saw two unicorns in Mecca in 1503—I had seen the beginning of the modern fascination with the Orient. Later, when designing boardgames such as *Silk Road* or *Isla Dorada*, I had made heavy use of good old orientalist clichés. Orientalism felt like the missing link between my two experiences.

## *Postcolonial Catan 1, 2, 3*

The first version of what has become this essay was a largely improvised seminar held in 2014, at Gen Con, the biggest US boardgame convention, which takes place every summer in Indianapolis. I basically took the orientalist paradigm from Said and transposed it, *mutatis non necessarilly mutandis*, to modern boardgames. It was fun and superficial, and more a big witty joke than serious reflection. What made especially ironic this take on orientalism is that, while

1. Edward Said. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1978.

2. Edward Said. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993

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postcolonial novels are often extremely humorous and ironic – think Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai, Hanif Kureishi, Naguib Mahfouz—postcolonial theory mostly ignores or even sometimes opposes irony. Fun is desperately lacking in Edward Said's books, which may be his biggest methodological difference with his mentor Michel Foucault.

I had great fun improvising from a half page of notes and mocking my fellow game-designers but, when flying back to Europe, I regretted this had not been recorded. So I tried to write down most of what I said, removing the most stupid jokes and adding a few reflections I had after the more serious discussions ending the conference. This tended to make my point more clear, more structured and more documented, but it remained a bit lampoonesque.

Anyway, I published this article on my website, and it caused huge reactions in the small boardgaming world. I was accused both of wanting to impose political-correctness to the whole boardgaming community, which had never been my intent, and to cowardly stop short of condemning exotic settings, which was a deliberate choice but not, I think, a coward one. Since these days, this article, a shorter version of the one below, is still by far the most visited on my website. The polemic started again one year later, when my game *Waka-Tanka* was announced and I got some remarks about my double language, condemning exoticism on one side and practicing it on the other. This was also the time I was contacted by the editors of *Analog Game Studies* who asked me if I would be interested in editing my blogpost into something a bit more weighty. It sounded like a good occasion to read some books, to make some points clearer and to develop a few ideas I had had since.

One of the reasons for these relatively strong reactions in a boardgaming world usually calm and soft-spoken is probably that the boardgames milieu and business is being globalized relatively late, and as much from Europe as from the US. Twenty years ago, modern boardgames were still largely a German thing. The cultural references in these games are still very European, while there are more and more gamers all around the world. This is another kind of exoticism for American gamers, who were the most reactive to my original article. This might explain the romantic and somewhat nostalgic feel of boardgames for many US gamers, and therefore their recent commercial success, but it also explains why some topics and representations are not exactly the ones to which Americans, and now people from the whole world, are used in other western medias.

### *Settlers and natives*

It all started twenty years ago, when I first played *Settlers of Catan*. One of the

first remarks made by a fellow player when going through the rules was the ironic “where are the natives?” This might have been more a striking issue for French players than for German or English speaking ones because the French language has only one word, Colon, where English has two with very different meanings, Settler and Colonist (Siedler and Kolonist in German, the original language of the game). So, the game is known in France as “Les Colons de Catan,” which can mean both “Settlers of Catan” or “Colonists of Catan.”



*Les Colons de Catane, recently renamed Catane, a more politically correct title. The abstract looking wooden roads and settlement tokens have also been replaced with plastic ones which have a deliberate European medieval style.*

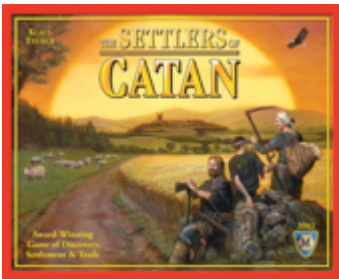
Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* was published in 1993, more or less at the same time as *Catan* and *Magic the Gathering*, but I read it only twenty years later. I was struck by the similarity between our initial reactions to *Catan* and what Said says of XIXth century European novels, and specifically of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, where he thought slaves, though nowhere to be seen, are always in the background. Of course, the stakes are lower, and Said’s analysis of XIXth century novels cannot be simply pasted on contemporary boardgames. Times have changed, agendas have changed, European countries have no colonies any more – and by the way Germany, from where modern boardgames originate, never had that many, and didn’t keep them long. But this striking similarity must mean something. And, indeed, natives are nowhere to be seen in *Catan*, except may be as the lone black robber bandit who is not really resisting invasion, since he is hired on turn by the different players. I remember my first idea for a *Catan* expansions was a new resource, magic mushrooms used to cast spells – this was also the time when I was discovering *Magic the Gathering*. The second one was to add a native resistance player. I didn’t finalize either one.

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This goes farther than the naïve politically-correct euphemization of historical issues that can be found in some games. The problem in Puerto Rico is not that there are slave tokens, it is that they are called colonists. The problem with Saint Petersburg is that one of the worst episode of forced labour in modern European history is treated as a good spirited competition between hardworking craftsmen. The same is true of fantasy worlds, which is why I was less bothered by the slaves in Five Tribes than I am by their replacement with fakirs – and anyway, one cannot complain both of the absence of natives in Catan and of the presence of slaves in Five Tribes. But I'll be back to this, since we're now doing a very similar move with my changing the cover for the US edition of my upcoming card game Waka Tanka.

### *Starting from scratch*

The Catan issue is different. The game action doesn't take place in a specific time or place, and the name Catan might even have been chosen specifically to sound bland and not too exotic—Catania is in Sicily, meaning south, but not too far south. The graphic implementation is very european, with no exotic resource—sheep, no lamas, bisons or antelopes. Settlers of Catan is colonization as we dream it, or as we would have liked it to be, colonization of a terra nullius, a new world which looks just like the old one and is void of alien presence. We all know it was very different and at least sparsely populated everywhere.



### *The new world looks insistently like the old one.*

This can be explained without resorting to some western fantasy or complex, only with simple game system necessities. In most development games, players start from scratch – two settlements and roads in Catan, a spouse and a wooden shack in Agricola – and slowly build their production engine, competing with each other. The appeal of these games, and the original appeal of Settlers of

Catan because it was something relatively new in 1993, is that they are not about war but about peaceful competition in designing this engine.



*With Archipelago, Christophe Boelinger tried to design a colonization and development game in which the natives were present and had to be dealt with, not necessarily through force. The players, however, still represent the rival European powers, and the game is very complex.*

The colonial setting can nevertheless be an issue, especially when it's plain and obvious. I remember a gamer friend recently telling me that he felt a bit uneasy playing Endeavor (but he never had any problem playing a war game, which is not surprising but raises some interesting questions). That's why Catan's name doesn't sound exotic, and that's why other "start from scratch" games have less problematic settings, such as prehistoric times or deep space colonization expansion. Nevertheless, in space development games, players are usually alien rivals in a mostly empty space. In Ad Astra, a game partly inspired by Catan which I designed with Serge Laget, there are alien artifacts but they have been left by long forgotten civilizations.





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### *Exploring Space.*

This can be explained without resorting to some western fantasy or complex, only with simple game system necessities. In most development games, players start from scratch – two settlements and roads in Catan, a spouse and a wooden shack in Agricola – and slowly build their production engine, competing with. Anyway, the game designer wanting to avoid problems can always settle Mars, even when it needs a little terraformation before any efficient colonization.

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### *And colonizing Mars.*

As an interesting aside, there are also lots of game about industrial revolution. A designer like Martin Wallace has published dozens with rails or industry barons. Industry and railroad development games are all about riches getting richer, and there are not much more workers or navigators in them than natives in colonial development games. The Steampunk genre, which is an industrial revolution fantasy, is also becoming very popular with boardgames – more about it later. Once more, it's possible to find sound practical reasons explaining why game designers are so often using XIXth century economic growth, and its two main engines, industrialization and colonization, as a setting for games that are all about developing effective production engines. I should nevertheless set Said aside and reread Eric Hobsbawm's Industry and Empire.

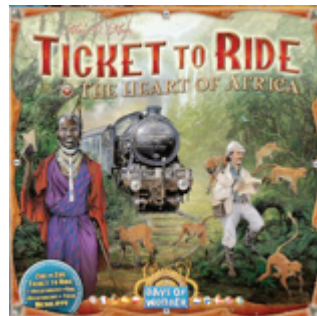
### *Good old games*

There might be technical reasons, but I think there's also something if not reactionary, at least romantic or backward looking in board games themes – much more than in video games themes.

The novel form has now been assimilated and transformed in the formerly colonized world, by postcolonial authors such as Salman Rushdie – but we're

still waiting for a postcolonial board or card game designer. Boardgame and card game design is not necessarily adverse to critics and subversion. The authors of cards against humanity might be the William Burroughs of game design—but there’s no Salman Rushdie, and boardgames are probably still one of the most typically western cultural forms—more about how Japanese card games fit into this later.

There is something old-fashioned, charming and romantic, not only in the themes and settings of boardgames, but also in their graphic style. See the covers of Ticket to Ride and Settlers of Catan, probably the two most influential typical board game designs of these last twenty years. Playing games has become a powerful anxiolytic in a western society which probably feels less secure than it did a few decades ago, and probably more in Europe in the USA. This might explain why board game sales are countercyclical, why game designers are mostly old white males (I’m one), why game themes and looks sound so old-fashioned.



*Notice that European countries such as Switzerland, Netherlands and even the United Kingdom*

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*can receive an “exotic” treatment. There’s no Ticket to Ride Scotland, Spain, Russia or Italy, but these are also often treated as exotic settings.*

Most of my examples come from “eurogames,” a style of games which originated in Europe and became really popular in the rest of the world more recently. Games designed in the US have more often fantasy settings, which also have some ambiguities – elves, dwarves and orcs can also be seen as way to simultaneously essentialize and defuse racial stereotypes – but this would need another article.

Let’s go back to Steampunk, a new romantic, retro exotic and relatively harmless setting. Steampunk is interesting because it’s mostly a gaming (and sartorial) universe. There’s almost no steampunk music, there are few steampunk movies, there’s little steampunk literature (even though everyone should read Thomas Pynchon’s *Against the Day*), but there are lots of steampunk boardgames (and rpgs, and larps). Steampunk is not only victorian esthetic with shiny bronze and iron, it’s also a reassuring world, in which good old european powers are still vying for control of the solar system – and natives on Mars, if any, can be ignored as Bruno Cathala and I did in *Mission Red Planet*. Well, I just added a “Native Resistance” discovery card, but it’s an afterthought I had while writing this article.

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*Onward to Venus and Mission : Red Planet, steampunk colonial games.*

### *Minimalism*

So what happens when “orientals” start designing card and boardgames?

A few months ago, I wrote an article about the many Japanese card games

designed and published in Japan these last years, the best known probably being Seiji Kanai's Love Letter.

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*Two Japanese games.*

My article was titled “Japanese Minimalism.” I suggested that some Japanese cultural atavism might be responsible for the specificities of these designs, mostly their simple rules and few components. I made some comparisons with literature – Soseki and Kawabata – then added unwisely references to Japanese food and zen gardens, stuff I don’t really know much about. I stopped just short of haikus and bonsais.

My Japanese readers were if not shocked, at least amused. I was answered that Japanese Minimalism doesn’t really exist, or at least is not an indigenous characteristic of Japanese culture but a western invention aimed at objectifying it—exactly what Said calls orientalism in his eponymous book, even when he never tells anything about Japan (for interesting reasons, which might be the same reasons why his books are immensely popular in Japan, but that’s another story). Of course, this critic was spot on, as a quick experiment can show: type “Japanese Minimalism” in Google, and you get mostly links to Californian architect studios and furniture stores.

Anyway, I was told the reasons for the minimalistic components of Japanese games were more trivial, due mostly to high printing costs and small markets, or may be even purely contingent, due to the personality of the first popular Japanese game designers. These designers claim to have the same references as mine – Settlers of Catan (again), Magic the Gathering, etc – and not to make anything specifically Japanese. Actually, Seiji Kanai once told me that my Dragon’s Gold was one of the games that lured him into game design, and I’m quite proud of this. On the back of the box of the most minimalistic of

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these games, Jun'Ichi Sato's *Eat me if you Can*, is even clearly written that it's a "Eurogame."

So much for the Japanese minimalist school of board game design. Of course, the fact all these designers don't intend to design specifically Japanese card games, but just small card games doesn't subtract anything from their talent.

The question of "Japanese Minimalism", however, is at least debated. The main reason why I didn't come across it when typing "Japanese minimalism" is that academic circles prefer to call it "Japanese reductionism". The reference book of those who claim that such a thing really exists and is really Japanese is *Compact Culture*, by O-Young Lee (a Korean), just to make this a bit more intricate. This book doesn't really come from the western world and, though it's slightly too old to enter the discussion of postcolonialism as it was started by Said, it is in part concerned with similar issues. Interestingly, O-Young-Lee doesn't reproach Japan as a colonizer with objectivizing Korean culture but with plainly ignoring it—and conveying this ignorance to the West. Indeed, Europeans have a very orientalist image of China and Japan, but don't have any image at all of Korea, which is also largely ignored in boardgame settings

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*Koryo*, a card game from a Korean designer and a French publisher, with a very vaguely Korean-steampunk setting. And, just to make things more intricate, *The King's Pouch*, a Korean game which is probably not really "occidental", but just trying very hard and quite successfully to look like a German game.

### *Oriental Dream*

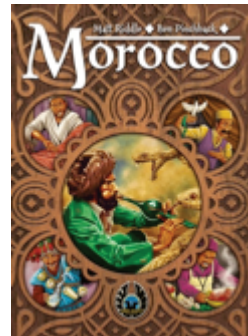
In *Orientalism*, Edward Said showed how the orientalist discourse, which he studied mostly in XIXth century novels but can be found in other cultural

domains, created its own object, how a fantasy Orient became a part of the real Orient, and how this was embedded in the colonization ideology and process.

As I said earlier, world literature has largely become postcolonial, and the same could probably be said of music (rap is something like postcolonial rock) and movies. There's nothing like this in games, and the image they show of the Orient is plain orientalist exoticism, of a kind that has disappeared from literature, movies and even comics – though it's still present in a few other very specific domains such as cooking or music.



*Istanbul and Five Tribes, two recent “1001 nights” games. Notice the fonts.*





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*This one has a good accumulation of clichés, with a half veiled and sexy girl, dice players who seem to be bartering, probably a slave on the front right, and even a leopard – I doubt there were many in medieval Spain, where the action is supposed to take place.*



*Charles Chevalier presents his game Sultaniya at the French game festival Paris Est Ludique. He looks exactly like the guy on the Istanbul cover.*

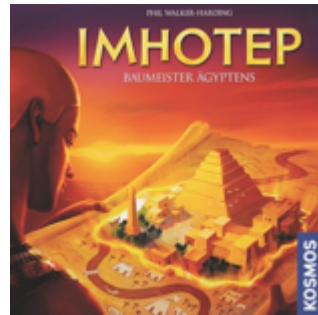
Have a look at the boxes of the hundreds of “oriental themed” games published every year. They usually look directly out either of a Guéricault painting, either of a popular geographic encyclopedia from the fifties. The Arab world has camels, sand dunes, silk or spice merchants, sometimes a djinn. Timeless India just has elephants instead of camels and the occasional tiger.



*Racing camels in Egypt, racing elephants in India...*

The most striking is probably Egypt, a really popular setting but with basically only two narratives, building pyramids and exploring pyramids (by the way,

Kheops, by Serge Laget and me, has just been republished). As for modern Egypt, or even modern Orient for what matters, it is totally absent from games. Of course, one of the reasons might be that contemporary orient is extremely complex, when boardgame settings have to be clear and simple – but isn't the "Complex Orient" another orientalist cliché ?



*Two new games about building the Egyptian pyramids. There are already hundred or more.*

The far east can be very vaguely historicized, with seven or three kingdoms in China, with Daimyos and Samurais in Japan. Since most players – meaning western players, which are still the large majority – have no idea what this really means and cannot place the game's setting in a clear historical timeline, this is akin for them to fantasy worlds







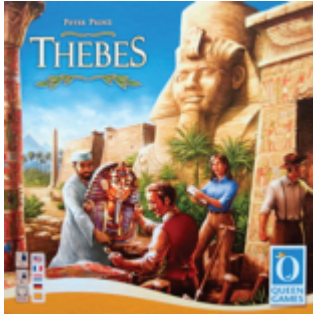
*Antoine Bauza and Bruno Cathala's games look more Japanese than Seiji Kanai's ones. The three publishers and illustrators are also French.*

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*And Japanese games can even be “re-orientalized” for the western market, as in this US edition of Love Letter in a popular Japanese-style fantasy setting.*

In the twenties, the young André Malraux was arrested while smuggling antique bas reliefs stolen from a lost Khmer temple, and imprisoned. He later got involved in the anticolonialist movement in Vietnam, then in the Spanish war, then in the French Resistance during WWII, and ended as the unsackable minister of culture of Charles de Gaulle. I would have liked my friend Pierô to represent the young Malraux fleeing from Angkor with some Khmer statue hidden under his gabardine, but unfortunately, that's what he had already made for Antoine Bauza's game Bakong. While orientalism was not an issue, it was impossible to represent Malraux with his unmovable cigarette, and this not only the US market but also now in France and most of Europe.



*Exploring pyramids, discovering a lost temple, these are orientalist clichés allowing for a representation of the westerner, as adventurer or archaeologist. It's a trick also much used in movies.*

---

The exotic doesn't need to be very far away – for German game designers, the nearby Italy is almost Africa, and the most exotic about Italy is its cooking, and especially pizzas. Spain also sometimes receives a similar treatment



*The game derives from carom, so it must have an Indian setting. It is, however, themed about cooking, so it should also have an Italian sounding name. The result is confusing...*

---

An interesting aside here is the impressive number of games about Venice, either the historical one or a fantasy one like Cadwallon or Tempest. There are probably more games about Venice than about all other Italian cities together. Once more, there may be some trivial and technical reasons, mostly that the canals allow for a simple and clear division in districts, for nice rules about bridges, for different movement rules on land and water, carnival masks make for mysteries and secret identities, etc. But there's something more – the fantasy Serenissima, if not the real one, has long been half oriental, the place where ships left for Constantinople, the city of Shylock and Othello, and the venetian dream is, in the literary tradition, an euphemized version of the oriental dream.



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*Fantasy and even more fantasy Venice.*

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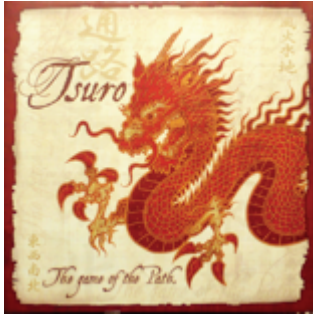
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*There's also something like Septentrionalism, but it's less prevalent and systematic.*

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*Abstract exoticism*

Even abstract games often have a setting, which is little more than a nice name and a graphic style, and these settings are usually exotic. It's not a new thing. When, in XIXth century Germany, someone had the great idea to adapt the Halma game to a star shaped board, he called it Chinese Checkers. It is still known by that name, even now in China...



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*Abstract Asia is full of dragons, but it's not always easy to decide if they're Chinese or Japanese.*

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*Now, we're clearly in China, and these games, though not totally abstract, could have had many other settings.*

China and Japan are still the most frequent exotic theme for western abstract strategy games. There also a few Vikings—runes have a nice abstract look – and sometimes American Indians, especially in games from the seventies and eighties.

### *Organic and ironic orientalism*

You may have noticed that I've discussed Japan twice. So where exactly is orientalism? What are the true orientalist clichés, Samurais and geishas, or minimalism, robots, cosplay and giant lizards? There is a big difference, which I think has been often missed by Said, between old orientalist clichés which have become an organic part of western culture and are often referred as such, sometimes even ironically, and more recent ones which are more likely to be taken at face value. When using the word orientalism, we usually refer to the

former ones, when the most problematic is probably the latter. Samurais and geishas, like pharaohs or maharajas, like indians and cowboys, have become a kind of organic orientalism, always more or less ironically self-referential. When using these images, the reference is not really to the other, but to the cliché itself. The mockery, if there's one, is more of exoticism itself than of the supposed exotic. Things are much more ambiguous when using more recent clichés, like robots, giant lizards and high school girls in skirts, or supposedly “timeless” features, like minimalism. Clichés, like other ideas, must never be considered ex abstracto, out of historical and cultural context. The same graphic style doesn't have the same meaning on contemporary boardgame boxes and in popular encyclopedias from the fifties. It can also have different meanings in Europe and in the US, as we will see with American Indians.



*The Japanese themselves can use orientalist clichés, like Seiji Kanai does in Mai Star. It's certainly ironic here, but there is also an ambiguous trend towards “self-orientalism” in contemporary Japanese culture, and not only for export. Of the Japanese and US edition of Mai Star, I don't know which one looks the most orientalist.*





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*Kota Nakayama's Hanamikoji is even more complex –the designer is Japanese, but the publisher and illustrator are Taiwanese. As for Lost Legacy – Hundred years wars, it's pure Occidentalism. It has a yellow haired medieval knight next to a hobbit like character and the statue of a siren.*



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*Anyway, when dealing with Japan, this is the true orientalism.... And it can even be exported into Japan!*

Interestingly, the German game publisher which makes the most systematical use of oriental settings and orientalist graphics, with lots of ochers, yellows and oranges, the publisher of Shogun, Maharani, Sultan, Alhambra, Thebes, Kairo and many other is Queen Games, whose head, Rajiv Gupta, is not exactly your typical German.

Though it didn't sell that well, Isla Dorada is one of my favorite designs. It has all the orientalist clichés, and more. My original prototype had a rather bland theme, with mediaeval merchants traveling through a vast country, buying here and selling there. The publisher found this a bit bland, and we decided for something more exciting – an orientalist mishmash with deliberate exotic clichés in a Tarzan comics style. The published game is Victorian steampunk, and the action takes place on a remote island where we can see the ruins of no less than four old civilizations – so we have Egyptian pyramids, and places with names ending in is, a mix of Polynesian villages and Pascuan statues, with names such as Wahi-Waha and Vanu-Tabu, Mayan pyramids with Aztec sounding names. The only reason why the last civilization sounds vaguely Indonesian is that it made for more funny names ending in ing or ang, but the monuments look more like Khmer. For gameplay reasons, the names of the places had to suggest immediately to what cultural area they belong. No China or Black Africa, but we made for it through event cards, with killer pandas and black savage tribes roaming the island, and we a Baron Samedi for the Caribbean Voodoo. However, I remember that we considered a long lost cut

limb of the Roman Empire for the fourth culture, and that at least one prototype version of the game had places with funny names in us and um instead of ing and ang. This was not very different.



*Isla Dorada, and another kind of irony – Hamlet and the crystal skull.*

Orientalism as described by Said is an ideological discourse which gets his strength from the fact that it's supposed describe the reality, the truth, of the Orient it invents. Boardgames, like French comics such as Asterix, or Iznogoud if you want something “orientalist”, are not scholarly works. They don't have the slightest aim or pretense at “truth”. Klaus Teuber, the designer of Catan, didn't want to tell us that the New World was empty when Europeans arrived there, and no gamer ever thought it was so. I know quite well that there are not daily elephant races in Indian cities – well, may-be there are some here or there, I didn't even check because I tried to be true to the cliché, not to the reality. In a way, exoticism in boardgames, like in comics, is always more or less ironical – though may-be we should sometimes make this more obvious.

*Colonizing the past*

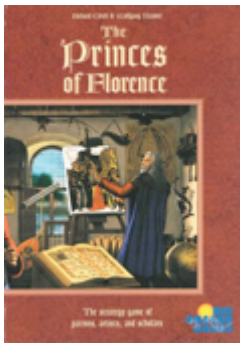
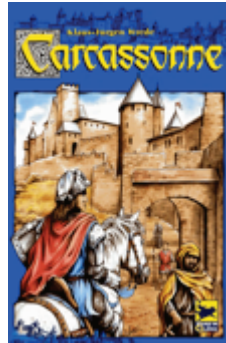
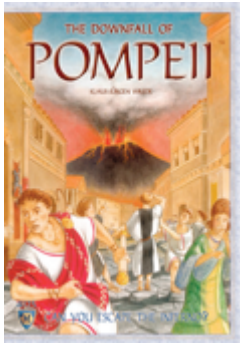
There's indeed an obvious and apparently valid point against most of what I've said so far – there are many games about the timeless Orient, but there are even more about some specific periods of western history, like ancient Rome or the Middle Ages.

The fantasy idea we have of some historical periods is not very different from the fantasy idea we have, or had, of other parts of the world. Far away times are like far away places – naive, simple, vaguely perverse and, of course, backwards. Orientalism and history, or at least history as it was invented in the XIXth century, were very similar fields of study, inspired by romanticism, and



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characterized both by a fascination for the alien and a necessity to objectivize it in order to construct it as a field of study, and to assert western, or modern, superiority. In France, as in many European countries, history and geography are still taught together in school, by the same teachers, as if past and foreign were interchangeable. The XIXth century painters singled out by Said for their orientalism, such as Gérôme and Géricault, were also much fond of mythological and historical settings. In 1904, Victor Segalen started his reflections on exoticism by noting that there is a parallel between far away in space, exoticism, and far away in time, which he called historicism. Since this word now has a different meaning, let's talk of "historical exoticism."

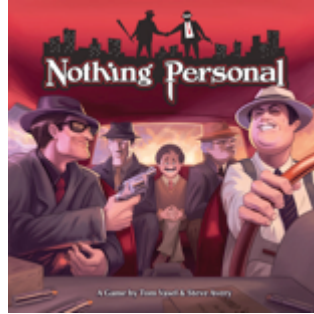


*Pompei, Carcassonne, Florence – the place tells the time.*

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While plain orientalism as described by Said is probably receding, or at least is dissected and discussed in universities, historical exoticism is still strong, mostly because there can be no “post-medievalist” or “post-antiquist” backlash like there was a postcolonial one. Ancient Greeks and Romans were objectified, simplified, caricatured and analyzed, all for our amusement and comfort, but

they haven't been actually colonized, and cannot strike back at our present. I sometimes wish they could, it could be fun – like in Gore Vidal's great novel *Live from Golgotha*.



*It works almost as well with American history.*

As a historian, I'm always wary of the easy explanation for everything past and strange—"in these times, people didn't think like we do." Maybe "in these times" sounds a bit too much like "East of Suez" in Rudyard Kipling's famous formula – "East of Suez, best is worst and worst is best."

So the real issue is not orientalism, but exoticism as a whole, in geography and history, and why it is so prevalent in boardgames, much more than in books or movies, much more than in video games, and so insistently unsubtle. The setting of a novel is a complex world that has to be built or, more often, studied by the author. It can be false, it can be a caricature, but it needs some depth. For the game designer, India or China, Middle Ages or Antiquity, are not geographical places or historical times, they are just topoi, sets of standard references, which must not be more sophisticated than those mastered by the player. The game designer, like the painter, cannot enliven his work by complex and subtle storytelling, and must do it only by winks and nods – a camel here, a helmet there. As a result, he makes heavy use of orientalist, "medievalist" or "antiquist" clichés.



*Cliché or exoticism?*

This can be conscious, even deliberate, as it was for me when I designed Valley of the Mammoths, or Mystery of the Abbey. Valley of the Mammoths is just a collection of bad clichés about prehistoric times. It’s assumed, it’s second degree, but what is interesting is that I probably could not have designed a “serious” game about prehistory. I didn’t have the necessary historical knowledge, and if I had this knowledge, the game would have had much more complex rules, would have been less fun to play, and removing the irony might have made it in the end more racist against Neanderthals. Anyway, racial prejudice against Neanderthals is not a pressing political issue, except in Jasper Fforde’s novels.



*The cover of the first edition of Valley of the Mammoths was plain exoticism*

And then there are Pirates. Pirates have everything. They have adventure, deep blue seas, palm trees and teams mostly made of white bearded males, with the occasional black look-out or sexy adventuress. Pirates of the Caribbean – not those of the Channel, of course – are like a part of the fantasy history of Europe that happens to take place in a sunny and exotic – if not oriental – setting. No wonder Pirates have been from the very beginning of modern boardgames, the most overexploited setting.



### *Pirates and the Exotic.*

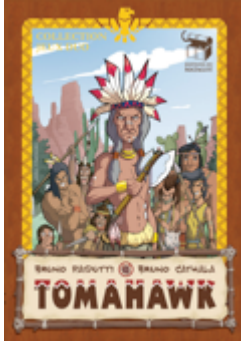
Simplifying and objectifying the past has obviously fewer social and historical consequences than simplifying, objectifying and even colonizing the rest of the world, but it's part of the same frame of mind. Orientalism and historical exoticism belong to the same intellectual discourse, and I find the prevalence of this discourse in games – even when it's more and more often in a distanced and more or less ironic way – impressive, and a bit unsettling.

If I were someday to write the scenario for a TV series, it would probably be about inventing time-travel and colonizing the past, about sending British governors, German hippies and American missionaries in Ancient Egypt or in prehistoric times. Well, I don't know any one in the TV series business, but may be I can make a game about it. Of course, a game full of clichés about British, German and Americans, because that's what make games fun.

### *Indians in Gaul and Germany*

Americans visiting Europe are often surprised by the importance of American Indians, and specifically Plain Indians, in our collective imagination. This is especially true in France and Germany, which happens to be also the countries where most European boardgames are designed and published. I have designed two games with a Plains Indians theme, Tomahawk and Waka Tanka, the latter being due to publication in the coming months, and there are also cute bright red Indian meeples in Pony Express, and a sexy squaw in Boomtown – though her long legs are hidden in the US version of the game.

The image we have of Plain Indians is definitely exotic, but what makes it different from the US one is that it has more to do with historical exoticism than with orientalism, and this especially if, as Said wrote, orientalism emphasizes on otherness. Our imaginary Indians were designed as similar to us, not as other.



*Native Americans and the Exotic.*

Most Europeans don't really know, or forget easily, that there are still Native American people and living native American cultures – for us, American Indians are historical figures, not contemporary ones. Also, in France and in Germany, Plain Indians as described in the late XVIIIth and XIXth century were used as the metaphoric basis when inventing a fantasized history of our origins, before the Roman conquest. The mythical Gallic village of old history books, and of comics like Asterix as well, with its chief and its druid, is directly copied from the almost as mythical Indian village, with its chief and sorcerer. Dolmens are totems, wild boars are bisons. When playing Indians and Cow-boys, something they still do, French or German kids always identified more easily with Indians than with Cow-Boys. This means that gently mocking this image is also, in a way, a bit like mocking our own ancestors, something everybody does, but never in a really bad way. This might be different in Britain, where Agricola is as much the English hero as Boudicca.

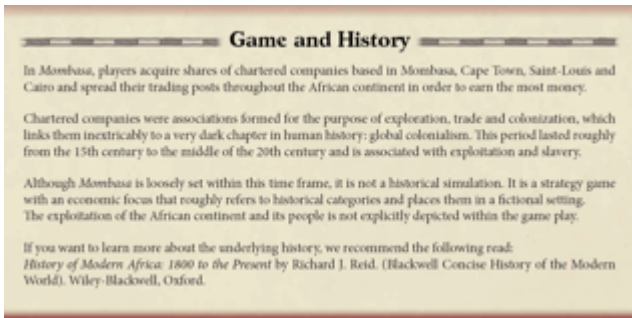
*Laziness and efficiency*

This whole article is still half a joke. I took Edward Said's orientalism paradigm, originally applied to XIXth century novels and paintings about the Near and Middle-East, and copy-pasted it on contemporary boardgames about other parts of the world – but it's not that different from what Said himself was starting to do in Culture and Imperialism. Then I brought it to Mars and Venus, following a hint given by Victor Segalen in 1908, in his Essay on exoticism. Last, I brought it to the past, which won't be colonized until we design a time-travel machine. It can't be surprising that things don't always fit perfectly, as we have seen in some details with two examples, Japan and American Indians – I still have to design a Japanese themed game.

Nevertheless, the recurrence of exotic settings in board and card games can be unsettling. Understanding why we use such settings, and why they can be unsettling, is necessary, but I don't intend to condemn it and I don't think we, game designers, should stop making boardgames that caricature the Orient or Ancient Greece, no more than we should stop making games that caricature barnyard or jungle. I know for sure I will keep on doing it because it's easy, it's simple, it's fun and, most of all, it probably makes better games. When it comes to game design, being lazy is usually being efficient.

It makes better games because the setting of a game doesn't have the same function as the setting and theme of a novel or movie. When reading a novel or an essay, or watching a movie or theater piece, one does spend most intellectual energy in understanding what is told in the book or movie, and tries to get all the subtleties of it. When playing a game, most of the player's energy is spent in trying to use the rules, the game systems, in order to win. The thematic setting of the game must not detract from "the game itself", meaning from aiming at victory. It might even be, like in a math water tap problem, just a tool used to make the rules clearer.

The setting must therefore be extremely simple, and must be known by the players before the game even starts. In good novels and movies, the storyline is used to explain the meaning of a complex theme. In good games, the light theme is here to help the players create the story. A game's setting must be very simple, very light, and works best when it uses connections already known by the players, not when it tries to reveal hidden ones. Pop culture settings, such as science fiction or heroic fantasy, are great for this, but are not mastered by everyone. Plain exotic settings, be they historical or geographical, are even better, because they are understood by more people. Furthermore, boardgames are often played by adults and children together, and therefore require "childish" settings and imagery, and of a kind that is known by two or even three generations. That's why simplistic exotic settings, be they exotic, historical or fantasy come naturally to me, and that's why I'll keep on using them, though I'll probably be more careful now to use more or less systematically irony to defuse the issues that I highlighted in this article. And yes, I know, irony can be missed, but it's so fun when it isn't that it's worth taking some risks.



*The caveat historical introduction to the rules of Mombasa is certainly clumsy. The first sentences are heavily didactical and the last one sounds like “no animals were harmed in the making of this movie”, but that’s probably the way to go.*

The video and boardgame industries are in many ways very similar, and many boardgame designers also work on video games. Surprisingly, orientalism, at least like I’ve described it here, is far less present in video games, Prince of Persia being the only example that jumps to mind (though the FPS games in Middle-East settings are another kind, probably far more problematic, of Orientalism). Historical exoticism also seems to be less prevalent. The depth and complexity required by massive multiplayer games and persistent worlds makes it impossible to use simplistic universes, and is much easier to deal with in fantasy. These complex games are also more and more devised by large teams involving designers in Europe and in the USA, but also in Japan and, more and more, in Korea, China or India. But this is also true of lighter games, may be because the video game industry is bigger and more globalized, both with gamers and designers. Of course, this makes for less problematic settings, but also for blander and, at first sight, less thought provoking ones. One can easily get bored of space travel, dragons, zombies and colored candies. But except may be for colored candies, fantasy settings are also a kind of exoticism, and in the end raise similar issues. The issue might be different if I were writing RPGs, which require a deeper and more subtle setting and are more akin to literature, but it’s not even sure, or if I were working in the video games industry. I remember playing some really good and fun larps full of bad clichés, often about Victorian England. These were, however, clearly ironic, and there are also very good larps and rpg dealing with historical topics in a more serious way – I’m just not very excited in playing them.

*Racism and game imagery in the US and in Europe*

Two times, with Isla Dorada and now with Waka Tanka, there has been



problems with the graphics in my games, which had to be changed by fear that they would be considered racist in the US. My friends at Days of Wonder also experienced unexpected attacks about the presence of slaves in their 1001 nights boardgame Five Tribes. I think there is something interesting in why some pictures or themes can be seen as racist in the US and not in Europe. When such an issue occurs, and it happens very often in various industries, the usual reaction in Europe is to mock American oversensibility and political-correctness, while the US point is to consider Europeans insensitive – which they are not – or provocative – which they might be. Another problem is that Americans are used to see attacks on political-correctness come mostly from the right, meaning from people who want the freedom to express problematic ideas, and don't realize that most European attacks are coming from the left, from people who think euphemizing language or representation is mostly an excuse not to deal with “real” social issues, and even to hide them. As a result, political correctness often harms the very cause it is supposed to defend.



*The Fakir (right) has one thing for him – the art is better.*

Anyway, maybe because I am a European, I still don't really understand what exactly was the problem with the presence of slaves in Five Tribes and, as I wrote earlier, I find their absence in Puerto Rico much more unsettling. Five Tribes has a fantasy and extremely orientalist setting, Puerto Rico has a more historical one, but both settings include slaves, and replacing them with so-called “colonists” or with fakirs, when there are hundreds of slaves but not a single fakir in the whole text of the 1001 nights, looks like a way to simply ignore, to erase, the problematic parts of our history. It's not getting



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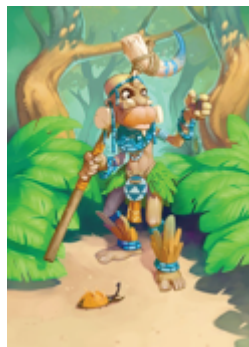
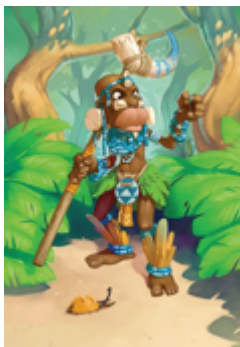
rid of orientalism or racism, it's not even helping to make sense of it, it's just euphemizing them in a very superficial, and some would say hypocritical way.

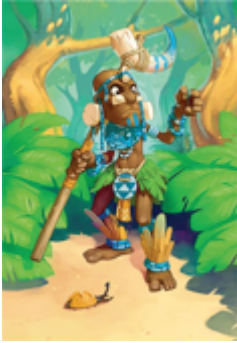
What happened to me, or at least to my illustrators and publishers, with the graphics of two different games is more interesting.

Isla Dorada is a compendium of orientalist clichés from several different – and often lightly mixed – cultures. Everything in its theme and its graphics is caricature. When Fantasy Flight Games decided to publish it in the US, they frowned at one of the pictures, a black savage of the Ovetos tribe, and asked the French publisher to change it because it bordered on racism. Actually, the only black boardgame designer I know, Eric Lang, who was working with Fantasy Flight Games at that time, didn't have any issue with picture, but he's also a Canadian, which means half a European.

The French publisher, and the artist, reacted in the usual way “OK, it's not racist, but Americans are a bit paranoid when it comes to these issues, let's change it.” In fact, the problem for the US publisher was whether the cliché was politically acceptable, while the problem for the French artist was to be esthetically true to the cliché, which is the real theme of the game.

Where it becomes really fun, is that we first mistook what Americans thought racist in the picture – it was the fat lips of the character, when the artist first thought it was the bone through his nose. This shows that an exotic caricature is not racist per se – no one raised an eyelash when the game was published in the US with a thin lipped black tribesman sporting a bone through his nose – but that the codes defining what is racist and what isn't are not the same in Europe and in the US. For us, and for me, the bone was borderline, the lips were no more problem than fuzzy hair – well, the Ovetos is actually bald, but you see what I mean.





*Three versions of the Isla Dorada Ovetos card: Naitiade's original, a first reworking with white skin, and the final version with black skin and thin lips. The thin lips make him look more cruel.*

A very similar story happened with the cover art for *Waka Tanka*. As I said before, we don't much care for stereotypes in the representations of American Indians in Europe. The main reason is not the obvious one, that we didn't kill them. It is that the exotic image we have of them is universally positive, and based as much on sameness than on otherness. Anyway, a Brazilian publisher decided to bring the game to the US, and was as surprised as me, the illustrator, and the French publisher when told the cover picture of the game was overtly racist. Of course, we first mocked the idea that it was impossible to draw an American Indian who looks like an American Indian, but after some discussions on game forums, it appeared that the issue was, once more, extremely specific. The problem was not the exotic and unrealistic setting, which is common in Eurogames and didn't create any problem so far, but the figure of the old chief in the foreground, which reminded every American of "Cigar stores Indian" – an image I didn't even know about.

For both games, the first steps in the discussion between European (and Brazilians) and Americans were trying to prove that the picture was, or wasn't, racist. Of course, this was vain, since the answer is that the same picture can be racist in the US and not in Europe, or the reverse, depending on what part of the representation of the other has become the accepted sign of racism, and whether the very act of caricature is considered insulting or not.

It is to emphasize this that, even when it means some added costs, the French publisher of *Waka-Tanka* has decided to keep the original cover in Europe, while the artist, David Cochard, was commissioned a new one that will be used only in the US. David even wrote a fun and clever, but also a bit angry, reaction on Facebook in which he explained that he was a caricaturist, and that not being racist meant caricaturing everyone in the same way, while refusing to caricature some groups would have been both racist and patronizing.



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*The French and US covers for Waka Tanka.*

We also considered relocating the action in Polynesia, and replacing the totem with a tiki. This could have been fun in order, after the game had been published and raised no eyelash anywhere, to point at the irony that while there are far more Polynesians than American Indians, the latter were an issue and not the former. But changing all the graphics would have been expensive, and the animal spirit storyline would not have fitted as well in the new setting. And anyway, I have another game with tikis in the pipe, we'll see what happens..... But, indeed, such issues will cause more and more problems in a world where products and images are globalized much faster than ideas.

# The First Nations of Catan: Practices in Critical Modification

Greg Loring-Albright

*Settlers of Catan* is a German board game by Klaus Teuber, first published in 1995. The game pits players against one another in an economic civilization-building race as they build structures and gather resources on the hexagonal tiles that compose the game's board. The game has achieved critical acclaim (winning the *Spiel des Jahres* in the year of its release) and popular success, especially in the U.S.: a 2010 *Washington Post* piece called it "the game of our time."<sup>1</sup> *Board Game Geek*, a popular international board-game hobbyist website, ranks *Settlers of Catan* 168th out of 79,923 games (as of 8 October, 2015) on its "hotlist." This paper situates *Settlers of Catan* in its context as a popular game in the U.S., and proposes a subversive gameplay modification that addresses that context.

It was during a game of *Settlers of Catan* that I began to wonder why, or even if, Catan was uninhabited.<sup>2</sup> I played on, though not without pushing down even more pointed questions about the narrative that I, as a settler of Catan, was enacting. Whose wheat was I harvesting when I rolled a six? Whose land was I altering when I built my roads and settlements? And with what entity was I trading when I shipped two wood in exchange for one resource of my choice at the port?

It became clear, at least to me, a white person playing this game in the U.S. in the early 2010s, that every game of *Settlers of Catan* re-tells the American myth of White European settlers stumbling upon a fertile land that was theirs by right, encountering no meaningful resistance, and acting on behalf of God and Country to develop economies, settlements, and cities in this "New World." My first thought was to never play *Settlers of Catan* again. But this response seemed

1. Blake Eskin. "Like Monopoly in the Depression, Settlers of Catan is the board game of our time." *The Washington Post*, November 21, 2010. [washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/24/AR2010112404140.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/24/AR2010112404140.html).

2. We had just decided not to play Andreas Seyfarth's *Puerto Rico* (2002), having discussed the problematic aspects of that game, in which players manipulate small brown "colonist" tokens to effectively produce goods from various plantations. The player who most efficiently exploits their workers and lands, and sends the most valuable goods back to the home country, wins the game.

inadequate: while it might solve the problem for me, it would not equip anyone else to wrestle with these troubling issues, and would put me in some awkward positions whenever *Settlers of Catan* came up as a possible game to play. So I decided to come up with a new game, based on *Settlers of Catan*, but one that would bring to light the things that had so troubled me about the game.

*Settlers of Catan*, both by its title and its thematic elements, situates itself as a game about settling new land. While the game does not root itself in any historical reality, playing it in the U.S. creates a link to the real historical settlement and concurrent genocide of indigenous peoples. Consider the “frontier myth,” a phrase that describes the work of Frederick Turner Jackson, whose 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” attributes the rapid development of the U.S. in the late 19th century, and the specificity of the U.S. American character, to mystical forces contained in the “empty” and thus edenic American West.<sup>3</sup> *Settlers of Catan*, by allowing its settlers to find the island of Catan in a similarly edenic state, reifies this myth, which helped to render American Indians invisible. Thus, *Settlers of Catan*, when played in the U.S., is complicit in continuing to make indigenous communities invisible. Primarily in order to counter this troubling aspect of *Settlers of Catan*, and to create a game that I feel comfortable playing, I have designed a variant of *Settlers of Catan* titled *First Nations of Catan*.

#### *First Nations of Catan: Introduction and Summary*

In *First Nations of Catan*,<sup>4</sup> one player (of the possible four that a standard *Settlers of Catan* set allows) plays as the First Nations, the indigenous inhabitants of Catan. These semi-nomadic people have the same goals as the Settlers (earn 10 victory points by building settlements, cities, and buying development cards), though they accomplish them in different ways.

Rather than playing on the edges and corner of the game’s hexagonal tiles, as the Settlers do, the First Nations inhabit the center of each tile, signaling their centrality to and initial presence on the island. This creates visual contrast with the Settlers, who cannot penetrate the interior of any hex tile, but instead are limited to building their roads along the edges of the tiles and their settlements

3. Frederick Turner Jackson. *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. London: Penguin, [1893] 2008.

4. The rules for this game are included in the appendix to this piece, and allow for a fully playable experience using a standard *Settlers of Catan* game set. I strongly encourage you to play *First Nations of Catan* (see Appendix) before reading on. However, I will summarize gameplay and some of its implications here.

at intersections of roads. The island of Catan is open to its indigenous people occupying its hinterlands, but forces the invading Settlers into the liminal spaces. This parallels the historical realities of the (white) settlement of North America in relation to indigenous North Americans: European settlers moved inward from the coasts, and later, along major rivers, while indigenous peoples as a whole occupied the interior in addition to the coastal lands.

While this rule creates an attractive metaphor, it limits the First Nations player's opportunities: In *Settlers of Catan*, players may gather a resource from any one of the three hexes that their settlement abuts. By forcing the First Nations player into the center, *First Nations of Catan* significantly reduces their resource-gathering capabilities. This metaphor runs contrary to the realities of North American settlement: indigenous peoples were successfully planting, harvesting, and hunting on the land while European settlers were struggling to adapt to unfamiliar plants, soils, and weather conditions. Nonetheless, I wanted to create a game where the visual representation of the First Nations differed from that of the Settlers on the playing space, and having the First Nations play in the center of the tiles accomplishes this.

To restore balance of resource opportunities to the game, I have given the First Nations player another playing piece: The Tribe. This marker can move across the board, gathering resources as it goes. The Settler players have no such game piece at their disposal. The Tribe piece also allows the First Nations player to take military action against the Settler players, who may only defend themselves, and may not initiate military action. This is the most radical change that I have made to *Settlers of Catan*. In "Orientalism and Abstraction in Eurogames," William Robinson suggests that, by focusing on economic development, Eurogames abstract and erase military conflict from the histories they represent, particularly military conflict against non-Europeans.<sup>5</sup> By bringing military conflict from the realm of the abstract back into the realm of the explicit, *First Nations of Catan* undoes the disappearing act that *Settlers of Catan* performed on Catan's indigenous peoples.

I realize that introducing a combat mechanic is troubling in its own right; games too often revert to simulated violent conflict as a thematic element. In my experience, many players enjoy *Settlers of Catan* precisely because it does not have a combat mechanic. However, this reading of *Settlers of Catan* ignores the presence and function of Knights and the Largest Army tile.<sup>6</sup> Just because

5. Will Robinson. "Orientalism and Abstraction in Eurogames." *Analog Game Studies* 1.5 (2014). [analoggamestudies.org/2014/12/orientalism-and-abstraction-in-eurogames/](http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/12/orientalism-and-abstraction-in-eurogames/).

6. In *Settlers of Catan*, players can play Knight cards to remove the Robber token from their tiles.

the violence on Catan is not simulated by die rolling does not mean that it is not present in the game's thematic materials. The empty, edenic state of the "frontier myth" is complicated and, to a certain extent, undone, as soon as violence occurs on the frontier. By creating a chance for more-explicit simulated violence to occur, I hope to have created a Catan that cannot be perceived as either empty or edenic.

*Designer's Diary*

In this section, I will describe my process of designing *First Nations of Catan*. By leaving a trail, I hope that other designers will be encouraged to craft similar subversive games, and that new games will arise to fill the gaps that *First Nations of Catan* has left open.

The act of re-purposing a game's pieces to create a new narrative counter to the original game's narrative is not a new one. In "Strategies for Publishing Transformative Board Games,"<sup>7</sup> William Emigh suggests and catalogues numerous instances of this practice. The ability of the player to usurp the role of the game-maker was, for me, perhaps the most exciting aspect of making *First Nations of Catan*, and the one that points to other ways for players of Eurogames to address some of these games' failings. Having finished (as much as any game is every finished) *First Nations of Catan*, I can say that the game seeks to address the invisibility of indigenous peoples in the original *Settlers of Catan*, and to bring more explicit conflict to the economic-conflict-only ethos of Eurogames in general and *Settlers of Catan* in particular.

Earlier drafts of this game addressed these issues in certain ways, but either did not address them fully enough, or raised too many other issues in the process. Additionally, I was looking to create a game that used the same pieces contained in a standard *Settlers of Catan* set, allowing anyone who can play that game to also play this new, revised version.

The game's initial form did away with *Settlers* altogether, allowing players to play as various indigenous Catan-ians attempting to cooperate or compete with each other to develop society on Catan. While this solved the invisibility issue by foregrounding the existence of indigenous peoples on Catan, it quickly became apparent that this game was merely *Settlers of Catan* by another name,

While it is not explicitly stated, the title of this card implies that the player is dispatching the Robber by a show or act of military force. The more times the player performs this action, the more likely they are to receive the Largest Army token, worth a full one-fifth of the required number of points to end the game.

7. William Emigh. "Strategies for Publishing Transformative Board Games." *Analog Game Studies* 1.2 (2014). [analoggamestudies.org/2014/09/strategies-for-publishing-transformative-board-games/](http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/09/strategies-for-publishing-transformative-board-games/).

as the 2-4 factions looked and played almost identically to the Settlers in the original game.

The necessity to make explicit the abstract nature of military conflict in Eurogames was the solution I settled upon for the next iteration of the game. The historical narrative of the (European) settlers creating economic prosperity for their own competing factions by, as a group, disenfranchising the indigenous (American Indian) people needed to become more explicit in the gameplay. Needing both First Nations players and Settlers on the board quickly led me to the idea of asymmetrical gameplay: all the players are playing the same game, but may have different victory conditions, or have different ways of achieving the same victory condition. In short, the First Nations player needed different rules from the other players.

This iteration of *First Nations of Catan* centered on conflict. The First Nations would attempt to drive off the settlers while the Settlers attempted to eradicate the First Nations. As soon as I began this iteration, it became clear that it was more troubling than *Settlers of Catan*. Every player was aggressively enacting violence on another racial group, and had no other viable way to win. I hesitated here. Troubling games have their place, and can be very effective in reminding privileged White U.S. Americans (men in particular) of their own complicity in historical horrors. Consider Brenda Romero's 2009 game *Train*, in which players must load a train with passengers.<sup>8</sup> Only later do they learn that this train is headed to a Nazi concentration camp. Making such a game out of *Settlers of Catan* would, no doubt, be useful in a U.S. context, reminding those of us descended from European settlers that our wealth is derived from ill-gotten plunder and genocide. My project, however, was to create a Catan game that I would feel comfortable playing, and this troubling variant was not it.

I had, however, landed on a useful mechanic, and one that helped differentiate my nascent game from *Settlers of Catan*: hidden movement. Hidden movement games allow a player or players to indicate their position(s) not on the board itself, but in another way that keeps the position(s) of their pieces a secret, often by using pen and paper and a location-based notation system. In this too-conflict-driven version of *First Nations of Catan*, the First Nations player controlled the nomadic First Nations group as it roamed across Catan. The location of this group was noted by creating a map of the playing area on a piece of paper and marking the location of the group as a turn-based number inside the hex where it was currently (unbeknownst to the Settlers) located.

8. Brenda Romero. "Train." 2009. [bbrathwaite.wordpress.com/train/](http://bbrathwaite.wordpress.com/train/).



This hidden movement idea moved the game into its third iteration. The First Nations still had a secretly-moving group associated with them, but now their goal was not militaristic. Instead, all players were competing for points via the standard economic competition model of *Settlers of Catan*. The First Nations gained the ability to build settlements and cities, and gather resources as they developed their society alongside the encroaching settlers. A military option was available (the hidden piece could strike at Settlers, removing their constructions from the board) though it was not the only path to victory. This version of the game came close enough to accomplishing my goals, and was balanced enough when played, that I published it on my blog, along with a short rumination that became the core of this piece.<sup>9</sup>

This version, however, had two flaws—one practical, one ideological: By requiring players to use a pen and paper, and to draw a new map of Catan for every game, I had made the game harder to use, and thus less likely to be played. Additionally, if the invisibility of indigenous peoples was the concern I was hoping to address, using hidden movement seemed antithetical to my purpose, as it erases pieces from the play area.

By removing the hidden movement mechanic from the game (the Tribe piece replaces it) and retaining the other elements from the game's third iteration, I had a game that worked both practically and ideologically. It required only one extra piece to be added to the basic *Settlers of Catan* game, and it played well. This is the game I settled on, and whose rules are included here.

### *First Nations of Catan: A Success?*

Designing this game required balancing three directives: Create a game that was fun to play, that did not erase indigenous people from its narrative, and that did not deviate from the pieces contained in the basic *Settlers of Catan* game.

The first element is perhaps the easiest to confirm, as it was my primary concern when beginning this design. *First Nations of Catan* creates a narrative for Catan wherein indigenous peoples exist, interact with settlers, and have a fair chance of surviving the encounter by winning the game.

Based on limited playtesting, I believe I have accomplished the second goal as well. *First Nations of Catan* is a balanced, asymmetrical strategy game, in which classic Eurogame elements (economic competition, long-term planning) mesh with so-called “Ameritrash” combat simulation mechanics (dice-based

9. See [gregisonthego.wordpress.com/2014/07/02/first-nations-of-catan-a-revisionist-history-game/](http://gregisonthego.wordpress.com/2014/07/02/first-nations-of-catan-a-revisionist-history-game/).

combat, strategic positioning of military units).<sup>10</sup> Each player has a fair chance at winning the game.

The final element was not, in fact, successfully met, but it was a compromise I was willing to make. By requiring an extra playing piece, I have added a small barrier to entry. I was hoping that players of *First Nations of Catan* would be able to simply download and print the rules, open their *Settlers of Catan* box, and play the game. But the Tribe piece requires one extra step: finding a piece from outside of the original game that will fit on the game board and be recognizable to all players. However, this is only a small hurdle, particularly for players who own any other board games, as almost any piece will suffice. Additionally, requiring the First Nations player to bring something onto the game board undoes, in a small way, the erasure of indigenous narratives that *Settlers of Catan* enacts.

*First Nations of Catan* accomplishes the goals I set for it, but there are many other possibilities for the island of Catan. Perhaps the troublingly violent variant that I had landed on could be expanded upon to create an uncomfortable reminder of European genocide of American Indians. Perhaps a cooperative game could be created to allow for a utopian Catan where Settlers and First Nations learn to co-exist peacefully.

In making this game, I set out to deal with my own discomfort at seeing problematic and inaccurate history recreated in a fictional realm. This type of rewriting is commonplace in reaction to non-game fictional texts. Fanfic and fan movies, for example, are well-established genres as reactions to movies, novels, television, and even video games. *First Nations of Catan* made me realize the possibility of game remixing as a sort of analog-game-based fan fiction. By using (mostly) the materials provided by the original text and remixing them, *First Nations of Catan* allowed me, as a player of *Settlers of Catan*, to address that which I find problematic about the original game without rejecting its system outright.

I am hopeful that players of *Settlers of Catan* will play *First Nations of Catan* and think about the differences between the games' narratives, especially European-descended people playing in the U.S. However, the possibilities of game remixing more generally are most exciting to me, and I hope that by

10. Eurogames and Ameritrash are mutually exclusive categories, often positioned as two extremes of tabletop gaming. Ameritrash (the "trash" is often tongue-in-cheek) games revolve around military strategy, incorporate die rolling, strategic movement, and plastic miniatures. Risk, Axis and Allies, and Twilight Imperium are popular examples. For more, see Board Game Geek's wiki: [boardgamegeek.com/wiki/page/Ameritrash](http://boardgamegeek.com/wiki/page/Ameritrash).

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contributing to this stream, *First Nations of Catan* inspires other game-players to become game-makers and re-makers.

# The Eurogame as Heterotopia

Devin Wilson

In a 1967 lecture, Michel Foucault stated:

*In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface...*

He then offered this counterpoint:

*Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am.<sup>1</sup>*

For Foucault, this synthesis of the real (“where I am”) and the utopian unreal (“where I am not”) constitutes a “heterotopia”. And in this essay I will argue that German-style boardgames (or “eurogames”) offer heterotopias similar to the mirror Foucault uses as an example; they are a sites of constituting ourselves by way of what we see (or do not see) in their virtual spaces. In so doing, I will present cases of enthusiasts seeing and not seeing thematic content in eurogames, scholars seeing and not seeing this, as well as my own way of seeing the game *The Castles of Burgundy* through an animal rights lens.

## *The Mirror Test*

Existing commentary on eurogames is most often written by enthusiasts and rarely by scholars, though academic interest seems to be on the rise. What we will see is that, though all can agree that thematic abstraction is a hallmark of eurogames, there is dissent among both enthusiasts and scholars about what to do in the face of that abstraction.

In the only extant monograph on the genre so far, Stewart Woods provides a history of eurogames that concludes that their thematic abstraction—while distinctive—is not of great interest.<sup>2</sup> This postulation of eurogames’ effective *lack* of theme is demonstrably aligned with the widespread enthusiast

1. Michel Foucault. "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias." *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984): pp. 46-49.

perspective that theme is often a negligible quality of games (even outside of wholly abstract games like *Blokus*). For example, popular board game reviewer Tom Vasel said of the eurogame *Vasco da Gama*, “Don’t come into this looking for any kind of theme.”<sup>3</sup> But—far more so than with many eurogames—*Vasco da Gama* is very plainly about something real: its namesake is a particular historical figure and the gameplay embodies this person’s biography in non-trivial ways. Yet Vasel forbids us from looking for theme in this game, insisting that there is nothing there.

Conversely, Will Robinson describes *Vasco da Gama* in far more situated terms, noting that the game’s abstraction erases the violence of the game’s thematic referent. Robinson looks at the virtuality of the game and subsequently directs his attention to the reality of the history depicted. He writes:

*Taking violent histories and turning them into resource management/worker-placement games for family audiences creates an ideological fairy tale. Vasco da Gama reinforces a clean and unproblematic interpretation of the Portuguese empire with each play.*<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the question of “what is being abstracted out” is vital, particularly when the theme is so specifically historical and that history’s violence undermines the supposedly non-violent interactions that characterize the genre. Ultimately, in Robinson’s critique of *Vasco da Gama*, it’s tempting to liken it to a Foucauldian mirror test at which Vasel fails by not seeing the reality of Vasco da Gama’s real actions via *Vasco da Gama*’s unreality.

But eurogames are often *not* specifically grounded in history, and their aesthetic potential cannot be exhausted by treating their abstraction with either dismissal (Woods, Vasel) or suspicion (Robinson). Yes, for many players a game’s theme will be secondary to its mechanics (however artificial this distinction may be), and Robinson’s specific suspicion of *Vasco da Gama* is indisputably warranted. But what Robinson is performing is not just a postcolonial reading of the game, but a demonstration that the general ambiguity of eurogames’ meaning allows players of these games to adopt diverse perspectives on how to view these games’ themes. We’ve already seen

2. Stewart Woods. *Eurogames: The Design, Culture, and Play of Modern European Boardgames*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012.

3. Tom Vasel. “Vasco Da Gama Review.” YouTube. The Dice Tower, 5 Apr. 2010. Web. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFLYxGIPu0Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFLYxGIPu0Y).

4. Will Robinson. “Orientalism and Abstraction in Eurogames.” *Analog Game Studies* 1.5 (December 2014). [analoggamestudies.org/2014/12/orientalism-and-abstraction-in-eurogames](http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/12/orientalism-and-abstraction-in-eurogames).

some range of views between Vasel and Robinson, but we can see it even more by looking to other games.

### *The Unsettled Meaning of Catan*

*The Settlers of Catan*, arguably the best-known eurogame, offers additional support to this idea. In the past few years, *Settlers of Catan* has proven to be such a groundbreaking phenomenon that mainstream news outlets could not ignore its popularity or—to a culture raised on *Monopoly*—its unfamiliar design.

To an even greater extent than what we saw with *Vasco da Gama* between the views of Robinson and Vasel, we can see the diversity of perspectives on *Settlers of Catan*'s thematic qualities in various publications' accounts of the game's explosive rise to fame. On one hand, an article in *The Atlantic* has one fan arguing for "its mass-culture appeal stemming from the game's 'lack of strong setting or theme'"<sup>5</sup> and the aforementioned Vasel makes no mention of theme in his own review of *Settlers of Catan* either.<sup>6</sup> However, a *Wired* article reports that an economics professor uses the game "to teach his four children how free markets work"<sup>7</sup> and the *Wall Street Journal* reported on how Silicon Valley entrepreneurs are drawn to the game because playing it is "like running a start-up."<sup>8</sup> Clearly this game—despite its "lack of strong setting or theme"—is encountered as meaning *something*, something *specifically* relevant to the players' real lives in a thematic way.

But the theme does not emerge solely from the game itself. It is the reality of the economics professor's perspective that allows for his ascription of the free market model to the game. Perhaps more strikingly, *Catan* is quite obviously not explicitly about "running a start-up", but because of its unreal abstraction and the real predispositions of the aforementioned executives, it is entirely reasonable for them to read it as being "like running a start-up".

While Robinson accurately indicts *Vasco da Gama* as promoting "an ideological fairy tale" in the context of real history, we can see that in titles

5. Scott Keyes. "Settlers of Catan: How a German Board Game Went Mainstream." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 07 June 2011. [theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/06/settlers-of-catan-how-a-german-board-game-went-mainstream/239919](http://theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/06/settlers-of-catan-how-a-german-board-game-went-mainstream/239919).

6. Tom Vasel. "Settlers of Catan." YouTube. The Dice Tower, 20 Apr. 2009. [youtube.com/watch?v=ITV03kCoDIw](http://youtube.com/watch?v=ITV03kCoDIw).

7. Andrew Curry. "Monopoly Killer: Perfect German Board Game Redefines Genre." *Wired*. Conde Nast Digital, 23 Mar. 2009. [wired.com/2009/03/mf-settlers/](http://wired.com/2009/03/mf-settlers/).

8. Pui-Wing Tam. "An Old-School Board Game Goes Viral Among Silicon Valley's Techie Crowd." *Wall Street Journal*, updated 17 Dec. 2009. [wsj.com/articles/SB126092289275692825](http://wsj.com/articles/SB126092289275692825).

like *Settlers of Catan*, that are less strictly grounded in real events, there exist fewer egregiously incomplete abstractions. This in turn enables us to see our own personal histories and ideologies—say, business experience or macroeconomic theory—filling in the gaps left by the abstraction of the genre.

*Farm Sanctuaries of Burgundy*

For games to achieve what we've come to expect from art, they need to have specific, personal resonance in the details of how we experience them. To further illustrate how eurogames, in their abstraction, may allow for this resonance, I offer an example of how I have personally come to appreciate *The Castles of Burgundy* (another eurogame). Here I show how eurogames can act as a heterotopic space, reflecting back the identities, ambitions, and dreams of their players through their polysemic components and mechanics.

First, I've selected some quotes from reviews of the game that were posted to the *Board Game Geek* website, a popular destination for boardgaming enthusiasts. These selections illustrate how the game's theme is often (but not always) assessed:

...a Euro game with pasted theme. Nothing special here, it's just you are bla bla bla, controlling bla bla bla, competing with other player in bla bla bla, to get the highest points by the end of the game to win it.<sup>9</sup>

And, reminiscent of Vasel's injunction regarding *Vasco da Gama*:

*If someone is looking for a thematic experience, do not look to The Castles of Burgundy.*<sup>10</sup>

Yet a large part of the pleasure I derive from *Castles of Burgundy* is precisely an aesthetic pleasure tied to my thematic experience with the game. The abstracted representational aspects of the game (including the game's rules) appeal to me in a particular way, and the only explanation for my severe dissention with the above reviewers and many others is personal difference. Indeed, I do look for a thematic experience with *Castles of Burgundy* and I find a satisfying one. It is this experience which I will now relate.

9. "[Review] Castles of Feld." Board Game Geek. [boardgamegeek.com/thread/1144258/review-castles-feld](http://boardgamegeek.com/thread/1144258/review-castles-feld).

10. "The Gamer Nerd Review: The Castles of Burgundy." Board Game Geek. [boardgamegeek.com/thread/1045641/gamer-nerd-review-castles-burgundy](http://boardgamegeek.com/thread/1045641/gamer-nerd-review-castles-burgundy).

First, a description of the game: in *Castles of Burgundy*, players develop various features of their 15th-century French estates by placing tiles on personal game boards, while also managing a number of resources such as money and goods. While this premise offers some quasi-historical grounding, any specific historicity is arguably lost in the abstraction of its gameplay, unlike in the precisely (though selectively) grounded *Vasco da Gama*. It is more like *Settlers of Catan* in this way.

Abstractions abound in *Castles of Burgundy*: the goods are simply represented by nondescript crates and bags, and “workers” available to players are simply used to affect the result of a die roll by one pip. The tiles that players may place in their estates are as follows: special “knowledge” tiles which change rules slightly for the player, castle tiles (each identical), ship tiles (each identical), mines (each identical), various buildings, and—of particular interest in this essay—various types of livestock.

The functions of these different tiles tend to be quite abstract, but the livestock tiles are of particular interest to me as an ethical vegan, someone who eschews the use of all animal products and byproducts because I do not consider animals to be ours to exploit. Given this perspective, I would predictably be invested in the details of how animals are represented and how I interact with them as a player.

The livestock tiles come in four species: cattle, pigs, sheep, and chickens. Each tile has only one species of animal on it, but the tiles vary in how many individual animals are shown. In the interest of providing an exhaustive account of how the game stipulates the function of these livestock tiles, I now provide the entire section from the rulebook (omitting only an example and a reference to said example):

*Whenever a player adds an animal tile to his estate (which can occur up to 6 times), then he immediately receives victory points (and moves his playing piece on the victory point track forward). Each tile has between 2 and 4 animals on it and the player receives the corresponding number of victory points for them. Should the player already have animals of the same type in the pasture (= a region of connected light green spaces) that the new tile is being added to, then he scores all times with the same animal type again in addition to the newly-placed tile...*

*Important: The animal tiles must be part of the same pasture but do not need to be immediately adjacent to the newly-placed animal tile. Tile with the same animal on them on other pastures are not scored.*



There is no explicit reason stated as to why these animals are on one's estate. Given the game's loosely historical setting and/or today's dominant attitudes towards these species, one could conceivably conclude that they are being raised to be milked, shorn, and slaughtered.

But those specific agricultural game mechanics are not present in this abstract game. When I play *Castles of Burgundy*, I stipulate that these animals are being rescued and protected from the very agricultural practices that dominate the relationships humans have with these nonhuman animals in reality.

Furthermore, the bonus points awarded when you unite animals with members of their own species is the only game mechanic related to these animals other than their initial scoring (which can itself be read as a reward for rescuing them from the market in which they are treated as resources to be consumed). The reason for this bonus is never stated, but one can interpret it as a recognition that these nonhuman animals are social beings, just as they are in reality. Due to this scoring scheme, the value of these animals literally exceeds the sum of their parts, which could actually provide evidence *against* a reading of *Castles of Burgundy* that considers these animals as valuable *only* for their body parts.

Given *Castles of Burgundy's* abstraction (which is typical of the eurogame genre), these animals can be interpreted as companions, wards, ornaments, or consumable resources. Given my perspective, I see them as more like wards or perhaps companions. The game—like much great art, and like *Settlers of Catan* as described earlier—can function as a mirror: it shows me who I am in reality through the materiality of its unreality. In my case, I can clearly (and somewhat unexpectedly) see my real vegan convictions in the unreality of the game and its abstract and polysemic components.

My view of *Castles of Burgundy*, like Robinson's view of *Vasco da Gama*, is grounded in social critique. But the situation I find myself in when facing the abstraction of *Castles of Burgundy* allows me to fill in gaps and virtually "re-theme" the game—without any physical modifications or concrete house rules—according to my politics. Robinson's analysis of *Vasco da Gama* is similar in that it seeks to revise assumptions surrounding the game's theme, but it does not seem to be the case that *Vasco da Gama* would allow for a virtual revision of its theme. This does not mean that his or my perspective is better or worse, but rather that we each arrive at favorable or unfavorable judgments of a eurogame's use of abstraction, depending on how we relate to the particular abstraction at hand.<sup>11</sup>

11. Converse to my reading of the game, Tom Vasel, in his review of the game, says (while joking

*Conclusion: Seeing Ourselves Where We Are*

In Foucauldian terms, the heterotopic space of a eurogame—like the mirror—has us “reconstitute [ourselves] there where [we are]”, whether we study Portuguese history, teach macroeconomics, run tech companies, or live a vegan lifestyle. The eurogame’s specular abstraction can allow the player to look at themselves if they are willing to do so. With eurogames, if we can pass this Foucauldian mirror test, we can open up a realm of personal meaning previously ascribed primarily to more traditional art forms and more explicitly expressive digital games.

The aesthetic future of games cannot be limited to digital games, and eurogames offer some compelling clues as to how we might experience satisfying semantic play along with traditionally satisfying gameplay. I hope that this essay encourages players and designers of tabletop games to pay closer attention the thematic details they might discern in the games they play (or, rather, in themselves) and the diverse aesthetic potentials therein.

Rules for First Nations of Catan are included in the appendix of this volume.

about the game’s title) that the game “has nothing to do with burgers”, and he concludes that “the theme should be put through a meat grinder with extreme prejudice”. He goes on to repeatedly call the theme “idiotic”, never really grappling with it beyond the superficial fact of its setting. His verdict of the game, while positive, reflects the reality of his near-exclusive orientation towards mechanics with far less interest in thematic details. Tom Vasel. "Castles of Burgandy Review." YouTube. The Dice Tower, 27 Oct. 2011. [youtube.com/watch?v=cQkAxU9I0wM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQkAxU9I0wM).



# Queering Girl Talk (The Board Game)

Amber Muller

The year is 1994: Bikini Kill is wailing “Rebel girl / When she walks, the revolution’s coming” while business women in shoulder-padded power suits purr about “having it all.”<sup>1</sup> In a basement in rural Canada, an intense argument unfolds:

*“You have to put another zit sticker on! You didn’t call a boy and tell him something gross!”*

*“Cuz the phone is cut off! And we’re running out of zit stickers!”*

*“Still counts! Draw one on!”*

My brother and I, similarly clad in his shabby hand-me-downs, are playing *Girl Talk* while our single-mother works the graveyard shift at a local truck stop. *Girl Talk*, first published by Golden in 1988 and then later by Hasbro in 1995, is one of many board games made and marketed at teenage girls in the 80s and 90s. Similar to truth or dare, the game encourages conversations about sleepovers, boys, shopping, and female bonding. When played by two poor, rural, prepubescent kids, however, it queers the game’s focus on urban, emphasized femininity and requisite conspicuous consumption that accompanies it. This paper argues that although *Girl Talk* is characteristic of a neoliberal shift in social consciousness that took a new interest in the formation of female subjectivities and the propagation of a exclusive, ideal version of girlhood, it can also be used to subvert these tropes through the queering act of radical play.

First, how do games cultivate and inculcate gender difference? For a board game to cultivate gender difference between its players, it must differentiate and typify the characteristics of masculinity and femininity as opposite yet complementary. These practices focus on natural differences between men and women, “weaving a structure of symbol and interpretation around them, and often vastly exaggerating or distorting them.”<sup>2</sup> The emphasis in this symbolic

1. Anne-Marie Slaughter. “The ‘Having it All’ Debate Convinced Me to Stop Saying ‘Having it All.’” *The Atlantic*. 02 July 2012.

2. R.W. Connell. “The Social Organization of Masculinity.” *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. pp. 67-86.

structure on femininity relies on the subordination of women to men and their compliance to patriarchal standards of beauty and domesticity. Heterosexuality is paramount to the maintenance of these practices.

In *Girl Talk*, heterosexuality underscores the entire game. Possible truth/dare challenges include “name a boy you’d like to date,” “describe the perfect boy,” and “if a boy you didn’t like asked you out, what would you do?” The explicit addressee of these challenges is female as the game’s instructions show: “Let the girl with the longest hair start first. Or, the most beautiful, the smartest, the youngest.”<sup>3</sup> The importance of physical appearance is constantly reinforced throughout the game. In fact, as the anecdotal introduction revealed, the penalty for failure to complete one of the challenges is to wear a zit sticker for the duration of the game. The accompanying materials read “Put that on my face?! Yuck!” What could be worse than this visible imperfection?

While the game depends on heterosexual motivation, it also involves deep homosocial bonding. Players are challenged to braid each other’s hair, reveal best and worst characteristics of their friends, and tickle each other. While some of these tasks blur the line between the homosocial and the homoerotic, the normalization of this contact as natural feminine behavior continually offsets the threat of homosexual attraction. The discourse of emphasized femininity renders queerness impossible for young females.

Player values are also adjusted to the typical values of patriarchal, heteronormative sociality. By completing the truth-or-dare challenges, for example, players receive points. When a player reaches 15 points, she is allowed to choose a Fortune Card from one of four categories: Marriage, Children, Career, and Special Moments. These cards are intended to be a fun reward for the winning player. Whoever manages to first collect four cards, one from each category, is allowed to read her future in the cards. In fact, the winning girl is encouraged to add to this fantasy by filling in blanks that are left in the Fortune Cards. For example, one card reveals “a pushover for athletes, you fall for (school jock) who will propose 10 years from now.” There is not a single Fortune Card from the “Marriage” category that does not reveal that the winner will marry a man. Similarly, every single card in the “Children” category predicts that the winner will become a mother. While some cards speculate at the number of children the lucky winner will be responsible for, other cards specifically discuss physical traits and gender “after three sons you eventually succeed in having a girl you will name (girl’s name).” Given the limited categories of the cards and narrow range of possibilities within each category, it is clear that

3. *Girl Talk*. Western Publishing Company, Inc.: Racine, 1988.

the ideal future is constituted by a few key aspects, namely the establishment of a nuclear family and maintenance of hetero-patriarchy. This alleged choice between marriage, children, career, and special moments reflects the rhetoric of neoliberal empowerment, which invariably conflates identity with the ability to choose between products, people, and corporations.

*Girl Talk* is the socio-political product of a discourse around female empowerment that characterized the mid-1980s. Following the perceived relative success of feminism's second wave, women entered the workforce in record numbers. The resulting challenge of reconciling career with familial obligations became a pressing and topical issue. *Girl Talk* reconciled this problematic by promising a natural balance between hetero-domesticity and the workplace through its "career" cards. In fact, a career is ostensibly a good place to find a husband. One card reads, "after three weeks on your first job as a (profession), you'll meet the man that you will eventually marry." Yet family does not necessitate the abandonment of career aspirations. One card reassures the winner "you will have children early in life followed by a successful career in (state)." In *Girl Talk*, girls are reassured that they will have simultaneous access to both the workplace and the domestic space. The career paths available in the game reflect the importance of physical beauty. Over half of the "Career" cards involve acting, modeling, or both. Careers for the players of *Girl Talk* are simply an extension of their prized feminine attributes: beauty, a malleable personality, and cheerful subservience.

The "Special Moments" cards are skewed to privilege heterosexual romance and the class advantages of conspicuous consumption. In truth, many of these "Special Moments" are so remarkably inane that they *only* serve as markers of future wealth and the accompanying privilege to indulge in trivial pursuits. Examples include: "You will decorate your future home using your school colors." and "You will build your dream house in (city)." The casual way in which these grand dreams are offered up as potential futures assumes players of this game are already on this economic track of upward mobility. In *Girl Talk*, it is only a matter of time before you are picking out drapes and debating a pastel or earth-tone color palette. At first this socio-economic coding seems benign enough, given that this lifestyle is being branded within the context of a light-hearted, children's game. But some of the game's implications appear far more sinister when considered in a critical context. One "Special Moments" card promises that "A tall, dark, and handsome policeman will stop you for speeding and give you a ticket, but will make up for it by asking you for a date." For those in poor, black, and otherwise marginalized communities with an ongoing history of police violence and disproportionate incarceration rates,

the prospect that an agent of the state ever offering compensation (especially in the form of consensual romance) is beyond the auspices of fantasy. But *Girl Talk* is not meant for these girls. This is neither the reality that the game reflects, nor the reality it is selling. Instead, *Girl Talk* is meant for the unmarked, socially secure bastion of white, middle-class girlhood.

The emergence of *Girl Talk* in the midst of the feminist ebb of the 80s is symptomatic of the loss of a sense of unity within the feminist movement. Acknowledging the complexity and difference of the female experience meant the reevaluation of the universalizing efforts towards solidarity (key to the moments of the 60s and 70s). Despite the efforts of feminists of color (such as Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa) who offered alternative theoretical visions for the moment, the loss of momentum brought about by Reagan era neoliberalism resulted in political stagnation and a return to the status quo of gender inequality. Invisible structures of hetero-patriarchy went unchallenged as commodity capitalism was equated by politicians and business leaders to social progress. Susan Douglas describes this phenomenon as the dual working of *embedded feminism* and *enlightened sexism*. Embedded feminism is the mistaken understanding that we are now post-feminist because all the goals of the movement have been met. “Because women are now ‘equal’ and the battle is over and won, we are now free to embrace things we used to see as sexist, including hyper-girliness.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, enlightened sexism “is meant to make patriarchy pleasurable for women.”<sup>5</sup> This modicum of pleasure is achieved through consumptive practices that replace fulfillment with accumulation. *Girl Talk* typifies both of these ideas. It brands girlhood as both fluffy, pink-hued fun, and also as the launching point for a life of heterosexual submission. By offering players choices between hetero-normative avenues of consumption, the game trains young girls to enjoy this narrow path of possibilities. “The fantasies laid before us, in their various forms, school us in how to forge a perfect and allegedly empowering compromise between feminism and femininity.”<sup>6</sup>

If, then, this game can be seen as a not-so-subtle attempt to instill hetero-patriarchal values and reproduce emphasized femininity in a generation of upper-middle class girls, what value remains in critically reflecting on it? The answer is found in experience. While *Girl Talk* is a product that is branded as a having a very narrow applicable market, its very nature *as a game* relies on play and meaning-making that exists within the ephemeral confines of the

4. Susan J. Douglas. *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2010, p. 12.

5. Douglas, p. 12.

6. Douglas, p. 16.

interactive experience. *Girl Talk* is performed in the moment of its playing and the game is equally constituted by the game's mechanics/structure *and* the players. In investigating the subject of this interplay in role-playing games, Arne Schröder stresses that "it is important to take both the narrative and ludological aspects of games into account."<sup>7</sup> Any understanding of games must approach them as "both cultural products and systems of rules." People are powerful variables within any system. This perceptive is at the heart of #INeedDiverseGames, an online community of gamers dedicated to promoting games that reflect the diverse demographics and interests of players in lieu of rehashing tired narratives of white, male heroics. Although the hashtag was only created in 2014, the incongruity between player identities and the limited availability of game instituted roles is not a new phenomenon. Queer adaptations are as multiplicitous as the diverse array of people who play games.

The context of play matters. In the case of *Girl Talk*, the trappings of emphasized femininity were queered when innocently appropriated and re-imagined by a 10 year-old, heterosexual boy. While *Girl Talk* appears to exclude and limit the range of acceptable girlhood, in practice, the game format gives permission to play with gendered practice and symbolically "try on" otherwise prohibited behaviours. The intended subject of a game geared towards inspiring in young girls an inclination to define themselves through consumption does not account for all discontinuities that other player positionalities may provide. In parallel research, it has been revealed that although some games have sought to produce the hegemonically masculine subject, they have failed to account for difference. In their analysis of militaristic video games as technology for preparing civilians for war, Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter remark that "Media audiences are comprised of subjectivities that are multiplicitous, assembled in manifold and contradictory social formations. Positions inscribed in games...are not necessarily replicated by players."<sup>8</sup> Interpretation is dependent on context and the mischievous and otherwise ideologically truant players can alter the message.

As children, my brother and I did not play this game ironically, nor were we intending to make a subversive statement about the indoctrination of gender in children. We were not protesting against the economic exclusivity of the narratives of success, nor the normalization of the nuclear family. Despite

7. Arne Schröder. "We don't want it changed, do we?"- Gender and Sexuality in Role-Playing Games. *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*. 2.2 (2008), pp. 241-256.

8. Nick Dyer-Witthford and Greig de Peuter. "Armed Vision and the Banalization of War: Full Spectrum Warrior." *Fluid Screens, Expanded Cinema*. Eds. Janine Marchessault and Susan Lord. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008, pp. 316-326.



this, we *did* shape the game to fit our resources and desires. We *did* re-word dares, expand the rules, and blur the limits of gendered behaviour. He braided my hair and I called female friends to confess crushes. In the context of a game, all things became permissible and possible. While a normative and exclusive version of femininity is packaged within *Girl Talk*, the free play offered by its platform as a game allowed players to queer the bounds of gender and sexuality that form the unspoken basis of the game. While other radical gamers (like those affiliated with #INeedDiverseGames) are now improvising with the parameters of classic games and creating new games which challenge the limits of normativity, I believe that the manner in which my playing experience anecdotally queers the neoliberal project of *Girl Talk* is relevant because it challenges the notion that radical play is a newly emergent concept. In fact, the very nature of a board game's materiality begs for players to bend, break, and blur the rules. Although the game's packaging states that this is "a game designed just for you", for two wayward, country kids, *Girl Talk* was a game re-designed just *by* us.

# Rule Explicitness Between Classic, Modern, and Computer Games

Kelvin Autenrieth

What do we mean when we say “the explicitness of rules?”<sup>1</sup> Here, I do not so much mean that specific rules only exist when they are unambiguous, but rather that all players have the complete knowledge of the rules at their disposal. This makes so-called “classic games” different from computer games. In computer games, the rules can be opaque, as they are – as program code – not visible to the player. In those games, the rules are gradually made available to the player.

When a player playing a racing game presses the up arrow key and her car begins to accelerate, then she presumes the existence of a rule: the pressing of the up arrow key lets the car accelerate. Through repeated successful attempts, she reinforces this knowledge. Indeed, it might now just so happen that the motor suddenly explodes, and then – in this case – that rule simply no longer applies. It is at this moment that the player refines the definition of the rule to herself: pushing on the up arrow key lets the car accelerate, except when the motor has exploded. Furthermore, she might imagine further exceptional cases: a flat tire, or an oil slick. Within a process virtually paradigmatic for all video games, a player gradually figures out the rules system as she plays. Ulrich Schädler describes such games as *inductive*:

*“Here the issue isn’t executing specific game moves based on known moves, but rather learning to find one’s way in the game based on the consequences of one’s own choices.”<sup>2</sup>*

Schädler’s differentiation between *inductive* and *deductive* games corresponds with Jesper Juul’s differentiation between *games of emergence* and *games of progression*.<sup>3</sup> Classic games are purely *emergent*, meaning that the requirements

1. This post is excerpted in translation from: Kelvin Autenrieth. *Spiele und ihre Regeln: Eine Analyse klassischer Spiele*. Masterarbeit. Leipzig: Universität Leipzig, 2011.

2. Ulrich Schädler. “Induktion statt Deduktion. Neues Denken für neue Spiele.” *Spielen: Zwischen Rausch und Regel*. Deutsches Hygiene-Museum, et al., eds. Dresden: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005, pp. 94–108, here 102.

3. Jesper Juul. *Half-real: Video games between real rules and fictional worlds*. Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 2005, pp. 67–83.

and the appeal of the game do not so much consist in deciphering the system (in terms of its functions), but rather having knowledge about the system from the outset and then using this knowledge in a clever way. Games of progression obviously require the continuous deciphering of new functions within the game.

Whereas computer games tend to give an impression of *contingency* – in the sense of arbitrariness – one encounters mere *probabilities* in classic games. What is the difference? Events of probability and events of contingency are different from each other in terms of the possible occurring events each permits, as well as the expectancy values they yield. The possible results of a six-sided die throw, for example, are the results: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. Their expectancy values each amount to 1/6. With a contingent event, on the other hand, the possible results as well as their probabilities of occurrence are simply less clear.

Let's imagine a digital six-sided die. When you press a button, a number appears on the display. Now you don't technically know in advance which results are possible, and with which expectancy values. When you see a "3" five times in a row, you might conclude that in 100% of all cases, the result of "3" would come up. But when the display showed the words "blue" or "no," what would be the possible space for events? And what are the expectancy values?

As a consequence, there is a strong *subjective* component when appraising whether a game *really* implies contingency or mere probability. This is obvious in more recently designed games, in which players draw action cards from a hidden card deck.

If someone plays her first game of *Monopoly* (1936; 2014) the Chance and Community Chest cards will possibly surprise her, because she did not account for – and/or could have possibly accounted for – the occurrence of these kinds of special events in the game. Whether or not a game result is calculable or predictable is greatly dependent on the player's knowledge. After a few games of *Monopoly*, the player will be able to recognize most of the cards and gets a sense of the kind of possible events; advancing spaces, going back spaces, getting cash, losing cash. Even when she does not concretely know *all* possible cards, unfamiliar new cards are no longer a surprise for her, because she has already learned the realm of possibility for events in the game. This preserves the balance of the game. When a player draws card that says "You have just lost the game," the game surprises this player with a *deus ex machina*. Because despite all the unpredictability that one can account for, the preservation of game balance appears in the form of a certain common sense. A game event like "Take 100 dollars from another player *or* take 1000 dollars from another player" is so nonsensical, that it is already certain beyond a doubt what – given "rational"

play of the game – the player will choose to do. A game event like “Suddenly, all of the other players lose their houses and hotels due to an earthquake” would surprise players because it is an extremely powerful game event that also can *ad hoc* determine the game outcome. If there were to be a water main break which put three adjacent buildings out of action for a round, this would hardly surprise anyone, because this game event correlates in some abstract form to the player’s prior knowledge of games. It is also important to differentiate between the *formal* and the *representative* levels of a game event. After all, the event description might seem profoundly strange. Instead of a water main break, let’s say that the houses were instead occupied by Huey, Dewey and Louie, who have uncharacteristically threatened to shoot some hostages. The SWAT team needs a round, to eliminate the three terrorists. Almost no player would be able to account for a *Monopoly* game event with this description, despite the fact that the hostage situation mirrors the water main break on the formal level.

Classic games distinguish themselves through the fact that the players already have knowledge about the possible game events as well as their expectancy values. They know which possible consequences are implied by their actions.

Many modern games, however, might be characterized as edge cases in this schema, especially if they have many different action and event cards that do not necessarily presuppose prior knowledge of their existence. The collectible card game (CCG) *Magic: The Gathering* (1993) consists of over 10,000 different playing cards, each of which feature numerous different attributes. In order to successfully play the game, a great degree of combined knowledge is required. Only through the completion of the *game of progression*, that is the acquisition of system-level knowledge, is the *game of emergence* even possible. Even if one knows all the cards as well as the general trends in the game’s rules, that still does not mean that one can play *Magic* well. Yet this is the prerequisite for developing any strategies whatsoever.

Furthermore, most – but not all – computer-based games are not classic games, because it is fundamentally unclear if internal rule systems are at play. Nevertheless, only with a glance at the real rule system – likely the program code itself – is it clear what kind of game it actually is. Instead of building a traditional differentiation, such as parlor games vs. computer games, it seems more productive to fall back on the difference between *progressive* and *emergent* games, such that the concept of emergence at play here corresponds with the explicitness of the rules themselves.

*\*Translated from the German by Evan Torner*



# Learning to Evaluate Analog Games for Education

Peter Wonica

We have recently seen a resurgence of board games designed to educate or help elucidate complex real life problems and systems. Board games offer unique attributes, such as portability, cost effectiveness, and accessibility that make them ideal for different informal learning settings. Scholars and developers are both working together to find settings where analog educational games can better serve populations than digital games. Games for a New Climate, a project led by Parsons School of Design and the Red Cross uses analog games to educate communities in developing countries about climate disaster preparedness and decision making.<sup>1</sup> Mohini Dutta and Ben Norskov of Antidote Games develop board games to teach people about complex topics, such as *Broken Cities* (2011),<sup>2</sup> a game about pollution, and *Bitten!* (2012),<sup>3</sup> a game about malaria. An example of a game in more traditional learning settings, *KEEP COOL*,<sup>4</sup> is a board game designed to teach about issues related to climate change in college environments. The growth of these educational board games creates new opportunities for learning experiences, but also new avenues for research on how games provide transformative experiences. This paper offers strategies for evaluating the educational efficacy of analog games so that they can be better implemented into classroom environments.

While there are scholars and developers creating educational works, there are also educators, with a background outside of game design, developing titles often based on the mechanics of popular games. Games such as *My Gift of Grace* (2014),<sup>5</sup> covering end of life issues, *Talk the Talk* (2014),<sup>6</sup> a game about adolescent sexual health, and *Before the Storm* (2009),<sup>7</sup> a game about disaster

1. PETLab, Red Cross Climate Center. Games for Disaster Preparedness. <http://petlab.parsons.edu/redCrossSite/index.html>

2. Mohini Dutta, Ben Norskov. Broken Cities. Nordic Climate Festival, 2011.

3. Mohini Dutta, Ben Norskov. Bitten!. United Nations Federation for Climate Change, 2012.

4. Klaus Eisenack. "A Climate Change Board Game for Interdisciplinary Communication and Education". *Simulation and Gaming*, Volume 44 2.3, pp. 328-348.

5. The Action Mill. My Gift of Grace. 2014. <http://mygiftofgrace.com>

6. Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health. Talk the Talk. 2014. <http://icah.org/resource/talk-the-talk/>

7. Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health. Talk the Talk. 2014. <http://icah.org/resource/talk-the-talk/>

preparedness, are recent examples of educational card games that are heavily influenced by the popular party game, *Apples to Apples* (1999).<sup>8</sup> With a simple gameplay model that can be easily adapted to different themes and situations, *Apples to Apples* has proved popular with educators as a means to produce playful learning environments. Yet, for all of the design opportunities afforded by analog games, it is important to ensure that educators and facilitators, when developing games for the classroom, are using a framework that has been evaluated for its educational potentials.

*Apples to Apples* serves as a starting framework for creating educational card games through its accessible, modifiable nature and its ability to provoke engaging conversations. Thus, this paper will demonstrate that while *Apples to Apples* can be an accessible framework for educators developing their first games, there are faults in the original gameplay that reduce its educational impact according to current theories of learning and motivation. In order to address these concerns, the addition of simple board game mechanics, such as resource management and negotiation, can improve the social and pedagogic potentials of this framework. *Before the Storm*, a collaboration between PETLab and the Red Cross Climate Center, is a case study in how a game can improve upon the *Apples to Apples* framework just by adding a few simple rules.

### *Party Games: An Educator's Best Friend*

*Apples to Apples* is a popular card-based party game in which individuals must play cards in response to a prompt. For example, if a prompt card says "Risky," players must choose a series of nouns that best fit that word or phrase. The interaction is heavily socially mediated, as a judge decides which one of the cards is best based on their own personal, and potentially arbitrary, criteria. This gameplay model, while simple, is an excellent way to create conversation, and is often a great icebreaker as well. The simplicity of the game has thus inspired many educators to develop their own versions of it, as theming the game is often a simple replacement of text on cards. Games such as *Talk the Talk*, *My Gift of Grace*, *The Metagame*, and other examples show how different themes such as adolescent sexuality, end of life scenarios, and culture, can be grafted onto this framework. But while this analog framework is nothing if not flexible, it's important for educators to ensure that it reflects a mature stage of development, rather than early experimentation, especially since many of these games are involved in potentially sensitive situations with clients and patients.

8. Matthew Kirby, Mark Osterhaus. *Apples to Apples*. Mattel, 1999.

Trying to fit the *Apples to Apples* gameplay into a current model of educational games is difficult due to the digital bias in many of these frameworks. Educators and developers must find a common ground to collaborate upon and the digital infrastructure of many educational games stands as yet another hurdle to be overcome in the process. As game scientist Sylvester Arnab notes, “game designers and educational experts do not usually share a common vocabulary.”<sup>9</sup> While the field of educational games is growing, it remains fragmented without a consistent and definitive model that is accessible to non-game designers.

Many models for understanding serious games often presume high levels of digital interaction, such as the Game Achievement Model,<sup>10</sup> or the Sandbox Serious Games model (both of which heavily emphasize virtual environments and multimodal storytelling).<sup>11</sup> When considering these models, narrative focused adventure games such as *Grim Fandango* (1998)<sup>12</sup> serve as examples of the Game Achievement Model. Additionally, open world games are examples of the Sandbox Serious Games Model, such as *The Elder Scrolls 4: Oblivion* (2006), or the *First Person Cultural Trainer* (Zielke et al).<sup>13</sup> While there are frameworks established for understanding how digital games can be provocative, educational, and transformative, there is a lack of established models for understanding the educational potentials of analog games in the same way.

The normative practice for developing educational analog games is to inject educational aspects into commercial games. Educators often simply add educational attributes to current board games in a way that “introduces tasks that are irrelevant to game mechanics.”<sup>14</sup> For example, while having to solve addition problems in order to move a Checkers piece tests rote memorization and recall, it has nothing to do with the game of Checkers. By attaching an “exogenous fantas[y]”, games like these impose an “educational sugar coating” on top of an already present design.<sup>15</sup> By providing educators with a stronger

9. Sylvester Arnab, Theodore Lim et al. “Mapping learning and game mechanics for serious games analysis.” *British Journal of Educational Technology* 46.2, pp. 391-411.

10. Alan Amory, Robert Seagram. “Educational game models: conceptualization and evaluation: the practice of higher education.” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 17.2 (2003), pp. 206-217.

11. Francesco Bellotti, Riccardo Berta, et al. “A task annotation model for sandbox serious games.” *Computational Intelligence and Games* (2009), pp. 233-240.

12. Tim Schafer, Bret Mogilefsky. *Grim Fandango*. LucasArts, 1998.

13. *First Person Cultural Trainer* is a serious game designed to teach cultural sensitivity for the military.

14. Rachael Helps. “How to Make Checkers Boring”. *The Ludi Bin*, 2014. <http://www.ludibin.com/2014/07/how-to-make-checkers-boring.html>



set of evaluative criteria, the games they devise can have a greater impact on learners, by situating them in immersive, thematic, and evocative experiences.

*Apples to Apples* can be a framework that helps educators understand best practices for the development of educational games. Instead of memorizing content, players use social games like *Apples to Apples* as a means to experiment with real life boundaries and situations. It provokes what is commonly referred to as socially negotiated play, which is “the idea that players determine the rules and the pace” of gameplay.<sup>16</sup> In other words, players modify their own gameplay experiences to suit their own needs and culture. This sense of latitude allows games to become performances where “social dilemmas and challenges ... provide opportunities for behavior rehearsal, collaboration, and self reflection.”<sup>17</sup> The goal of these games is not the rote memorization of facts and information, instead socially negotiated play allows for people to explore ideas and topics within a safe environment mediated by play.

#### *Putting Apples to Apples to the Test*

In order to evaluate the efficacy of socially negotiated play in *Apples to Apples*, we must draw on prior frameworks for understanding learning and motivation in games. This study draws on emerging research which connects game attributes to their impact on motivation and learning. Motivation and learning scholars aim to better link game attributes and learning outcomes. In a survey of 39 game attributes, researchers determined that six were the most influential in learning and engagement in serious games: fantasy, rules/goals, sensory stimuli, challenge, mystery, and control.<sup>18</sup> Below is an evaluation of the game mechanics of *Apples to Apples* and how they correspond to these attributes (Figure 1). I developed this table by comparing the definitions of each attribute to the rules of *Apples to Apples*.<sup>19</sup> For all of the ways it engages players well in socially motivated play, *Apples to Apples* falters on many of these core attributes.

15. Brad Paras. “Game, Motivation, and Effective Learning: An Integrated Model for Educational Game Design”. DiGRA 2005: Changing Views.

16. Gifford Cheung, Alison Lee, et al. “Dispensable, Tweakable, and Tangible Components Supporting Socially Negotiated Gameplay.” *Games and Culture* 8.4, pp. 259-288.

17. Robyn Hromek, Sue Roffey. “Promoting social and emotional learning with games:” *It’s fun and we learn things*.” *Simulation & Gaming* 40 (2009), pp. 626-644.

18. Rosemary Garris, Robert Ahlers. “A game-based training model: Development, application, and evaluation.” *Interservice/Industry Training, Simulation & Education Conference*, Orlando, FL. 2001.

19. As established by Rosemary Garris and Wendy Bedwell. See Wendy L Bedwell, Kyle Heyne, et al. “Toward a taxonomy linking game attributes to learning an empirical study.” *Simulation & Gaming* 43.6 (2012), pp. 729-760.

Attribute Connected to Learning	Evaluation Against <i>Apples to Apples</i> Core Ruleset
<p><b>Fantasy (and Mystery)</b> Defined as “separate from real life and evokes mental images that do not exist.”<sup>20</sup></p>	<p>Minimal to no aspect of fantasy or role-play. While players can create mental pictures from certain adjective – noun combinations (Such as ‘Creepy Penguins’), the imagery is not frequently used.</p>
<p><b>Rules/Goals</b> Determined by “clear rules, goals, and [feedback].”<sup>21</sup></p>	<p>Clear rules and goals, although simple in nature. Rules are there to create structure around basic wordplay and does not include any aspect of simulation.</p>
<p><b>Sensory Stimuli</b> Presented as “new and vivid visual, auditory, or tactile stimulations ... of an alternative reality.”<sup>22</sup></p>	<p>Arguably low sensory stimuli as graphics are often text based cards. This is though a strange category though since much of the research is biased towards digital modes of sensory stimuli, which the level of stimuli is limited with a physical card-based medium.</p>
<p><b>Challenge</b> There is a level of “uncertainty about goal attainment”. Correlated with motivation to continue playing.”<sup>23</sup></p>	<p>Often low; challenge is determined on your relationship to get the “right card” for judge, which can often be arbitrary due to the differing tastes of individuals. Challenge is not directly consistent.</p>
<p><b>Control</b> Based on the “manipulations a player exerts on a game”. Also refers to in-game variables and agency.”<sup>24</sup></p>	<p>Minimal control in that player’s main option is to play a card in response to a prompt. Choices are informed by their perception of what a judge would pick as a correct card. The choice of a judge is final and can be arbitrary.</p>

Figure 1: A Chart by the author evaluating the learning goals of *Apples to Apples*.

One problem this chart reveals is that because *Apples to Apples* focuses so much on the social aspect of the game, many traditional board game attributes such as challenge and control are lost in the gameplay experience. While minor

simulation elements often provide board games the opportunity to explore social dynamics, economy, and ideology, such rules are not present within *Apples to Apples*. This is not to say that *Apples to Apples* should be turned into an economics simulation, but instead that the framework can draw inspiration from other board games in ways that compliment the socially negotiated play that makes it an engaging experience.

*Talk the Talk*, a game about adolescent sexual health, shows how *Apples to Apples* can be adapted to provoke an increased interest in the topic. It does this through mechanics that represent many of the virtues of socially motivated play, encouraging players to take on the role of characters confronted with sexual health issues. While this sense of role-play and conversation can be transformative and freeing, there is also a degree to which the game's social mechanics lead to a less controlled experience that is more comical than informational. For example, a scenario posed from *Talk the Talk* states "My boyfriend thinks I'm cheating on him and wants to go through my phone. Do you have advice about (insert card)." Certain cards such as "Blogger," "Cheerleader," and "Likes to Take Selfies" simply don't fit into this formula and force players to rely on heavy argumentation skills to make them valid in this context. Despite these anomalies, many other cards present an opportunity for a conversation. However, these conversations often rely on the idea that many people in the group are already informed about the issues addressed by these cards, or even more tellingly, that there is a trained facilitator present in the group to control and steer conversation. The above framework suggests that improving aspects of challenge and control (originally absent in the *Apples to Apples* framework) can positively impact one's educational experience. It is important to understand the limitations of the *Apples to Apples* framework, so we can find paths to improve upon it in engaging, yet accessible ways.

One game which expands on this framework successfully is *Before the Storm* (2009). Here, a fantasy scenario is created where players must role-play a community facing potential climate disasters. *Before the Storm* takes the core mechanics of *Apples to Apples* and includes a minor layer of resource management and negotiation. Players take the role of a community preparing for upcoming natural disasters. Instead of responding to just one "Prompt" card, players must respond to a sequence of cards of growing intensity. Players recommend actions to be taken to address immediate problems, such as a light shower, culminating with a long term forecast of severe flooding. Even though a judge decides on the best actions to be taken from the players' cards, the judge's decision can be challenged by the players though a vote, adding yet

another layer of social dynamics. The game includes resource management as players must work with a set of finite resources when planning for different forecasts. Negotiation takes place when players debate their decisions, leading this game to better integrate thematic mechanics within the game's design. These additional rules encourage players to think critically about climate change, forcing them to negotiate their social interests with a set of finite resources. In this way, *Before the Storm* takes the general idea of *Apples to Apples* and alters its dynamics of challenge and control in order to modify the shortcomings of the original model.

With the inclusion of these two mechanics, *Before the Storm* becomes an excellent example of how the *Apples to Apples* framework can be modified according to some basic educational principles. By incorporating minor elements of chance, challenge, and negotiation, additional complexity is added to the experience. In this way, the game maintains the socially negotiated nature of gameplay that makes *Apples to Apples* an engaging experience, yet offers new attributes that were lacking in the original framework. Fortunately analog games are easily modified, and, as such, we educators can strive to use frameworks such as the chart offered in Figure 1 to consider how to best incorporate games in the classroom.



# Pen and Paper



# Out of the Dungeons: Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Source Books

Jaakko Stenros & Tanja Sihvonen

In this article, we are asking why representations of LGBTQ themes and characters have been so scarce in the context of role-playing games. A preliminary analysis of the first three decades (1974–2005) of English language RPG source material shows that when the topic has not been silenced altogether, it has been met with reactions that seem humorous or extreme in hindsight. Our aim here is to map an alternative history of role-playing game source books, one that pays attention to queer sexualities, and connect these representations to other cultural spheres.

## *Introduction*

Games that deal with sexuality are few and far between, and games that deal with non-normative sexualities are even less common. Generally speaking, games and game worlds have not been inclusive of individuals or themes that are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ; for practical reasons, we will use ‘queer’ to refer to LGBTQ in this article).<sup>1</sup> Explicitly queer content has started to appear only relatively recently in genres where sexuality is considered relevant for the portrayal of the fictional world or the characters inhabiting it, such as simulation and role-playing games.<sup>2</sup>

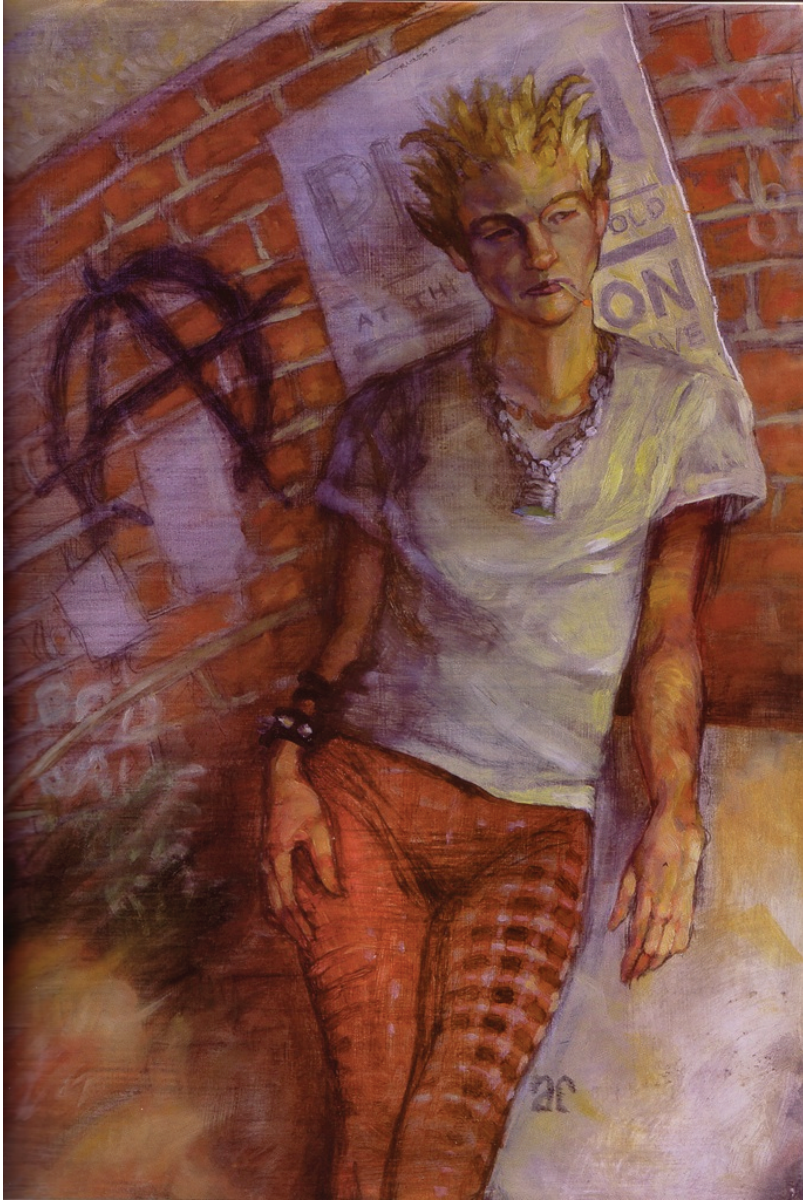
Although there is substantial research on role-playing games and player cultures that surround them,<sup>3</sup> non-normative sexualities seems to be a topic that still calls for initial study. Furthermore, the various histories written on

1. Note also that the article uses terminology found in the research material, some of which is not considered appropriate or correct today.

2. Adrienne Shaw. “Talking to Gaymers: Questioning Identity, Community and Media Representation.” *Westminster Papers*, 9.1, 2012, pp. 67–89.

3. For examples, see: Gary Alan Fine. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983. Daniel Mackay. *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2001. Sarah Lynne Bowman. *The Functions of Role-Playing Games. How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2010. Markus Montola. *On the Edge of the Magic Circle. Understanding Role-Playing and Pervasive Games*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Tampere. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2012.





*A Wilder from White Wolf's Changeling: The Dreaming (1997).*

role-playing games are mostly silent on the topic as well; gender is sometimes discussed, but sexuality is scarcely mentioned at all.<sup>4</sup> In the context of digital games the academic discussion on representation and identification is further

along, but since the practices of play are different in analog, social games, that discussion is not directly applicable here.<sup>5</sup>

Despite its long history as something that is perceived as dangerous, blasphemous and alternative, the culture of tabletop role-playing games has remained fairly conservative, especially so when it comes to social issues. However, since role-playing games are shared social game experiences that use textual sources as starting points and not as determining guidelines, the actual practice of role-playing may have had content markedly different from the guidebooks. This article, however, concentrates on the representation of queer sexualities in role-playing game source books, not on actual play practice.

On the basis of an examination of English-language RPG source books from years 1974–2005, our starting point is the observation that queer themes have been either completely absent or extremely sporadic for most of the history of role-playing games. Where the topic has not been silenced altogether, it has often been handled in a way that seems odd, humorous, or extreme in hindsight. In this chronological research article, we will track down both textual and visual mentions and hints at queer sexualities and see how they function within the context of the game. The instances of male homosexuality – as those we initially started to look for – as well as ‘queerness’ more generally are then analyzed as representations in the context of cultural studies and the discussion on identity politics. Our survey is far from comprehensive, and indeed, this article is intended as an opening into a new field of study.<sup>6</sup>

### *Basics of Role-playing Games*

When analyzing characters in role-playing games, one of the most important things to consider is the function of the character position. Game characters vary from being a near-invisible tool (almost like a cursor on the screen) used to implement changes on the game world, to a complex depiction of beings akin to real-like humans with rich personal histories. This progression from a cursor

4. Michael J. Tresca. *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2010. Jon Peterson. *Playing at the World. A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventures from Chess to Role-Playing Games*. San Diego: Unreason Press, 2012. Shannon Appelcline. *Designers & Dragons. A History of the Roleplaying Game Industry*. Silver Spring: Evil Hat Productions, 2015.

5. Adrienne Shaw. *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. Anna Anthropy. *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012.

6. Indeed, we encourage readers who are aware of queer representations in role-playing game source books not mentioned in this article to contact the authors.

to an avatar to a possible person is tied to the game context. Genre, theme, and general aim of the game play an important part in setting up the context. For example, games focusing on exploration of terrain and violent conquest have less use for multifaceted character constructs than games examining societal issues or simulating alternative social structures.

Today's role-playing games span this whole spectrum. In fact, as the term "role-playing game" (RPG) suggests, one of the most important aspects of the RPG is 'playing a role', adopting and adapting characteristics in order to become someone else for the purposes of a game. However, role-playing games are not always about nuanced character study. In the dawn of role-playing games, play consisted mainly of fighting, exploration of space and adventure, while character development referred to measurable statistics, not growth of a personality. Furthermore, this tradition is still alive and well, even if it is nowadays only one approach to role-play among many.

In the 1970s and 1980s, role-playing games were generally not dealing with societal themes. When RPGs were attacked as subversive and dangerous, the defense was that they were simply make-believe and imagination.<sup>7</sup> Considering the context where role-playing games emerged – a male-dominated wargaming community – it is not surprising that the themes concerning sexuality or gender were not dealt with in the source books. Jon Peterson's meticulous history of the roots of the original *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), *Playing at the World*, notes that the wargaming community that the role-playing hobby grew from was a particularly conservative youth culture.<sup>8</sup> Sexuality was hinted at in the earliest publications, but those instances were quickly removed in later editions. It seems that role-playing games and their source books in the 1970s were based on rather conservative and conformist values.

Indeed, the role-playing hobby acquired its reputation as a dangerous subculture in the 1980s based on its alleged flirting with demon worshipping, not its sexual open-mindedness. A case in point of this is the coverage of role-play conventions by the popular press. For instance, Michelle Nephew notes in her dissertation *Playing with Power* how this kind of reportage tends to show "aging boys" as awkward and desexualized – while often also including a picture of a token woman, scantily clad. In the popular media, both role-playing games and their players have been considered remarkably asexual for a

7. See, for example, Gary Gygax quoted in Michelle Nephew. *Playing with Power: The Authorial Consequences of Roleplaying Games*. Doctoral dissertation, The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2003.

8. Peterson, 2012.

long time. Indeed, portrayals of *Dungeons & Dragons* in the media often act as shorthand for males who are overweight, socially awkward, living with their parents – and perpetually single.

The objectified and sexualized women in the visual material commonly associated with role-playing source books have been there from the very beginning. Bare female breasts can be found from the very first edition of D&D. However, there was a clear move away from such sexist imagery by the late 1970s, coinciding with a debate on female character and players.<sup>9</sup> Although sometimes used in imagery, sexual themes did not proliferate in role-playing games. Alas, sexuality was not the only essential element of real life missing from role-playing games. This passage, from the description of clerics in the extremely popular ‘Red Box’ version of *Dungeons & Dragons* (1983) is particularly telling of the attitude of the publishers at the time:

*In D&D games, as in real life, people have ethical and theological beliefs. All characters are assumed to have them, and they do not affect the game. They can be assumed, just as eating, resting and other activities are assumed, and should not become part of the game.*

We can assume that sexuality is covered by this statement: ‘it should not be part of the game.’

However, source books and actual practice of play are two separate issues. Playing of tabletop role-playing games are poorly documented, but Gary Alan Fine’s ethnography *Shared Fantasy* conducted in late 1970s amongst role-players shows for instance that, at least among his informants, raping of female non-player characters by male player-characters was rampant in the games conducted by all-male player groups. The source books only provide the starting point for role-playing games, and they cannot determine player contributions and the actual practices of play.

### *Feeling Your Way in the Darkness*

Queer sexualities started to figure in the role-playing game books towards the end of the 1980s. However, in these early depictions, male homosexuality is presented as especially villainous, traitorous, and deceitful. There are also a few scattered instances of characters that can be described as transgender

9. Aaron Trammell. “Misogyny and the Female Body in Dungeons & Dragons.” *Analog Game Studies*, 2.4 (2014). Online at <http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/10/constructing-the-female-body-in-role-playing-games/> Jon Peterson.

or genderqueer – but also transphobic. There is Slaanesh, for example, the god of lust and excess, who has fluid gender expression and who inhabits the Warhammer fantasy world (from *Realm of Chaos: Slaves to Darkness*, 1988).

When it comes to the introduction of queer themes, GURPS (*Generic Universal Role-Playing System*) led the way with a licensed game based on the Wild Cards novels, *GURPS Supers Wild Cards* (1988). There you could find a closeted gay homophobe, an anti-hero imported from the novels called *Mack the Knife*. Similarly, in the superhero supplement for *I.S.T. International Super Teams* (1991), there is a closeted gay man from the Soviet Union (a gay hero living with AIDS was cut from the manuscript, but published online years later). Perhaps the most positive mention of queerness is to be found in *Bunnies & Burrows* (1992, inspired by Richard Adams' novel *Watership Down*), which contains a passage that describes how a male bunny in heat will hump anything, including inanimate objects and other male bunnies.

### Mackie Messer (Mack the Knife; real name Detlev Mackintosh) —

Created by Victor Milán

Born: circa 1970, Hamburg, Germany

**Appearance:** Mackie is a nervous, pallid little (5' 7", 125 lbs.) hunchback with straw-colored hair, a long thin nose, sunken cheeks, and a thin-lipped mouth. He's prone to facial tics and his skin has a dry-parchment quality that makes him look older than he really is. He is usually very poorly dressed in stained, worn jeans and a scruffy black leather jacket.

**Wild Card Ability:** Mackie can make the molecules of his body resonate to change their phase and interpenetrate other materials. He can walk through walls, and he can also make his hands vibrate very rapidly so that they can cut through any known substance. (Against a very hard substance, he would have to cut more slowly.)

ST 8 (-15 points) IQ 10 (0 points) Speed: 5.25  
DX 9 (-10 points) HT 12 (20 points) Move: 6  
Damage: Buzzsaw punch 2d+2 impaling; Thrust 1d-3; Swing 1d-2

**Advantages:**

Ambidexterity (10 points)  
Patron: Senator Gregg Hartman on 12 or less (40 points)

**Disadvantages:**

Bloodlust (-10 points)  
Intolerance: Homosexuals, Jews, Jokers, Homeless (-10 points)  
Jealousy (-10 points)  
Sadism (-15 points)  
Ugly (-10 points)

**Super Advantage:**

Insubstantiality (Switchable +1; Can turn parts of body insubstantial selectively +2; 98 points)

**Power and Super-Skill:**

\* Vibration Power 20 (Buzzsaw, 160 points)

Buzzsaw-16 (works on all kinds of materials +6, 64 points)

**Skills:**

Brawling-12 (8 points); English-8 (½ point); German-10 (0 points); Running-9 (½ point); Scrounging-9 (½ point); Streetwise-14 (10 points)

**Quirks:**

Identifies strongly with Mackie Messer of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*  
Constantly whistles "Mack the Knife"  
Reads slowly and with difficulty  
Dislikes women  
Hates his real name

Mackie's mother was a Scots prostitute. His father was a high officer in the Bundeswehr, or so his mother always claimed. Actually he was a American deserter from 'Nam. Mackie grew up on the streets of Hamburg, sporadically schooled, usually in trouble. He went to Berlin in late 1980s and hooked up with the revived Red Army Fraction terrorist group. He met Gregg Hartmann when the senator was kidnapped by the RAF and Gimli's Jokers for a Just Society. It was there, also, that he became a Hartmann puppet and was maneuvered into going berserk and killing his fellow terrorists to free Hartmann.

Mackie is an authentic psychopath. He hates his real first name (which is German slang for homosexual). He has a morbid hatred of homosexuals, predicated on his fear that he might be one . . . and he hates women as well. He also hates Jews, bums, jokers, and anyone who's better off than he is (which is almost everyone). Only fear and pain turn him on. His hunchback has nothing to do with the wild card. It is the result of a birth defect and causes him constant pain. He fancies himself a Marxist, but actually knows little about politics. He loved working for the terrorists because he loves to kill, personally and up close.

His hand can cut through anything physical. He is the perfect assassin. Deadly, remorseless, unstoppable. He loves and will do anything in the world for Senator Hartmann.

*Character description of Mackie Messer from GURPS Supers: Wild Cards (1988).*

The earliest mentions of queers in RPG source books are either inspired by

mythological or specific fictional texts – or these characters seem to be included for the purposes of comic relief. As HIV/AIDS was becoming more of a social issue in the course of the 1980s and starting to figure in all kinds of cultural texts, hints of it also made their way into role-playing game materials. At times, the moral panic around queer sexualities was very prominent also in the context of role-playing games.

The darkest representation of homosexuality at the time comes from publisher Task Force Games. In 1988 they released a game called *Central Casting: Heroes of Legend*. In its source book, being transsexual, asexual, gay, bisexual, fetishistic, voyeuristic, or necrophiliac are all listed as sexual disorders and examples of terrifying dark sides of personality.

The same publisher mentions homosexuality in its later works as well. In *Heroes Now!* (1991), they have a designer position statement that expresses a wish that these kinds of abominations (such as being gay) should not be brought into the game at all. If they for some reason had to be included, these dark features should be played in such a way that they would be awful burdens and obstacles which the player characters would try to get rid of. The game is positioned as having explicit conservative values. When writing about homosexuality and other “perversions”, the game’s authors declare that a sexual relationship is appropriate only between husband and wife, all perversions can be tamed and cured, and using the role-playing game for experimenting with a ‘wrong kind of behavior’ is a very bad idea:

*Despite “popular” trends in culture and psychology, the authors of this book believe the following three statements to be true:*

- *Any sexual relationship other than between a husband and wife is wrong.*
- *Perverse sexual desires are a form of learned and ingrained behavior and as such can be controlled, overcome and eventually replaced by healthy desires and behavior.*
- *Using roleplay to vicariously experience wrong behavior is a bad idea.*

*While we are not called to be judges, it is our belief that those who chose to continue in perverse behavior will ultimately be held accountable for their actions. Those who seek to brainwash society into accepting such behavior as normal are only making the problem worse for themselves and others.*



**649F: Sexual Disorder** [D]\*

\* All Sexual Disorders are considered to be Darkside personality traits by most societies, fantastic or otherwise.

These are what many societies consider aberrant sexual behavior, usually because of religious doctrine. Whether societies in a fantasy world consider them so is up to the GM. Yet it should be taken into consideration that, historically speaking, most societies have not condoned the behaviors list below. Take care in presenting and roleplaying these disorders, since a flippant, careless, or callous stance may embarrass, annoy, or offend other players and GMs alike.

**Instructions:** Roll 2d8, and total the results. Then match the total against *Table 649F* to select the disorder.

**Roleplay:** Like the person addicted to drugs, characters afflicted with sexual disorders may feel a need to fulfill their sexual needs (the stronger the Trait Strength the greater the need).

Most Cultures and societies consider anything other than straightforward sexual desire for members opposite sex as abnormal, even evil and unclean. As mentioned previously, this is often due to the moral climate established by prevalent religions. In such societies, practitioners of these behaviors may be persecuted and punished (even marital infidelity may be severely punished). On the other hand, where something is banned, one may be certain that unscrupulous types will find some way to make a profit from it.

Be wary of what the character may go through if his "secret" is discovered. More often than not, a character with a sexual disorder will attempt to hide it from others, either out of fear or shame (although a character afflicted with transsexualism may attempt to hide his true sex). It is not uncommon for a character afflicted with a sexual disorder to imagine himself to be normal or OK and try to live with it rather than change.

**2d8 649F: Sexual Disorder (roll 2d8)**

- 2 **Transsexualism.** Believe oneself to be the spirit of one gender trapped in the body of the opposite gender. May express itself as constant Transvestitism.
- 3 **Complete disinterest.** No sexual desire.
- 4 **Shyness.** Uncomfortable around opposite gender, difficult to talk with them. At the extreme, it may be a fear, either Gynephobia (fear of females) or Androphobia (fear of males).
- 5 **Homosexuality.** Sexually attracted only to persons of same gender as oneself.
- 6 **Bisexuality.** Sexually attracted to persons of both genders (usually more strongly to one than the other).
- 7 **Transvestitism.** Sexually excited by wearing clothing of the opposite gender. May try and pass oneself off as a someone of opposite gender, which may be difficult unless the character is also androgynous (neither strongly male nor female in appearance).
- 8 **Nymphomania (F) or Satyrism (M).** Abnormally strong, uncontrollable desire for sexual experience.
- 9 **Sadism.** Derive pleasure from inflicting or viewing pain in others. Often combined with masochism.
- 10 **Masochism.** Derive pleasure from having pain inflicted upon oneself. Often combined with sadism.

**2d8 649F: Sexual Disorder (continued ...)**

- 11 **Too Prude.** Convinced that sex is bad in any form. Despises all who lower themselves to it, including self. Roll a d8. If the result is 6-8, the character is actually suppressing or trying to hide his own sexual disorder. Reroll the disorder on this table.
- 12 **Voyeurism.** A "Peeping Tom" who is sexually excited by watching others perform sexual acts.
- 13 **Fetishism.** Sexually attracted to or excited by a specific person or thing. The character may have a specific collection of fetishes. Roll a d10 on the subtable below to select the object of attraction.
 

1	Women's clothing (not for wearing, though).
2	Men's clothing (not for wearing, though).
3	Shoes.
4	Hair - particularly women's hair.
5	Select from <i>Table 867: Body Locations</i> .
6	An animal.
7	Select from <i>Table 649C: Phobias</i> .
8	Select from <i>Table 863: Gifts &amp; Legacies</i> .
9	A type of person. Select on <i>Table 750: Others</i> .
10	A relative. Select on <i>Table 753: Relatives</i> .
- 14 **Necrophilia.** Sexually excited by dead bodies.
- 15-16 Roll 1d2+1 times for multiple sexual disorders.



From here — Return to the Table that sent you here ...

*Sexual Disorder table in Central Casting: Heroes of Legend (1988).*

Tables for random generation of events or effects were a widespread trope in early role-playing source books. Such tables were places where queer sexualities and relationship options could slip in as if through the cracks. The Central Casting books are an extreme, explicit example: in *Cyberpunk 2020* (1990) there is a table where you can end up creating an ex-lover for your character - of the same sex. *Over the Edge* (1992) does not have a random table, but a list of

examples of secrets a character might have. On the list we can find, “You are gay and feel the need to keep this a secret”, but also “You worked for the CIA” and “You are a cannibal.”

Generally speaking, queer sexualities started to break in more noticeably in games belonging to the cyberpunk genre. A particularly interesting example of gay male representation is offered by *Cyberspace: Sprawlgangs & Megacorps* (1990). In it a homosexual gang called ‘Models’, consisting of handsome male fashion models, randomly assaults beautiful women in the street. They cut their faces with knives, then point the finger at them and shout: “Now we are prettier than you!” The source book also explains that even though all the members of this gang are openly gay, “they will not ‘stoop’ to prostitution as a matter of ‘pride’”.

These early representations of male homosexuality are interesting in the sense that clearly there was a wish to bring in more contemporary, “adult” themes among RPG designers, but handling such matters was very awkward. It looks like conservative designers felt compelled to include these kinds of themes – while advising against actually playing with them. It is notable that while it is strange to read these storylines and character descriptions today, some of these were ground-breaking at the time of their publication. Later on it has turned out that there were gay designers working on those games, as well, but even they struggled with the narrow-minded politics of representation at their disposal.

There are allegations that some companies, such as *Dungeons & Dragons* publisher TSR and *Warhammer* publisher Games Workshop, have periodically had rules that banned the depiction of queers. Although such claims are common, we have thus far been unable to substantiate them. Nevertheless, it does not take effort to interpret the TSR Code of Ethics from 1984 relating to rape, lust, and sexual perversions to also ban queers: “Rape and graphic lust should never be portrayed or discussed. Sexual activity is not to be portrayed. Sexual perversion and sexual abnormalities are unacceptable.” It has to be noted that the general acceptability of these themes has always depended on the games’ target demographics, too. For instance, it is easy to encounter claims that the sexuality of god Slaanesh was diminished by Games Workshop in 1990 when the company started to address a younger player-base.

#### *A New Day Starts at Dusk*

A watershed moment in the treatment of queer sexualities in RPGs is the influential game *Vampire: the Masquerade* from 1991. In fact, the whole game



**LEADER:** Jimmy Idle.  
**CORE MEMBERSHIP:** ~ 120.  
**ASSOCIATED MEMBERSHIP:** ~ 5,000 worldwide.  
**DEMOGRAPHICS:** 100% male, age 16-25.  
**HEADQUARTERS:** Decibel Death Club, San Francisco.  
**TURF:** Castro Street District.  
**IDENTIFIERS/COLORS:** High fashion clothes (currently, Eros Flynn baggy coveralls), styled hair.  
**ACTIVITIES:** Assassination, modelling, industrial sabotage and espionage, drugs, shopping.  
**GENERAL ATTITUDE:** Aloof.  
**COMMON EQUIPMENT:** Sensory Cyber Systems, DNI and razornails (all concealed). Most SF members have Beretta M98's.  
**SPRAWLGANG TYPE:** Dealer.  
**ALLIED GANGS:** Dick Van Dykes, Shades.  
**ENEMY GANGS:** Airboys, Ginos ("greasers"), New Hitler Youth, Road Kills ("filth"), Untouchables, WASPs ("preppies"), Net Heads.

### COMMENTARY

This gang is, interestingly, made up of the most cold-blooded killers in the city. They are without exception beautiful young men (some of them made so with the help of surgery) who model for fashion videocatalogs and shows for their day job. At night, however, they don stealth black coveralls and perform elaborate spy and sabotage missions for the Megacorps. Some are quite intelligent — skilled CyberDeck operators and covert operations experts. Those with skulljacks have the placed so as not to detract from their appearance, of course. Models only employ cyberware which can be fully concealed.

Groups of Models will roam the City at night, randomly attacking people on the street, especially beautiful young women. They deliberately scar their victims, laughing and yelling "Now we're prettier than you!" This is not just a bunch of pretty psychotics, however: the Models have a well-run criminal organization, with an international network devoted to gathering and selling sensitive information.

The Models are often given the derogatory names of *Style Queens* and *Pretty Boys* by their enemies (often the WASPs and New Hitler Youth). While the entire membership is unabashedly homosexual, they will not 'stoop' to prostitution (as a matter of "pride").

Though an international gang, the Models' HQ is in San Francisco.

Note: Beretta M98's are custom 95R's with integral silencer and laser targeting.



### MODEL

**Profession:** Sneak  
**Level:** 5th  
**Hits:** 70  
**AT(DB):** NoA(10) or LBA(5)  
**Fire:** +90 Machine Pistol (Beretta M98 — a custom 95R)  
**Melee:** +80 Razornails  
**Skills:** +45 Electronic Bypass, +40 Culture, +40 Equipment, +50 Exploit, +30 Stalk & Hide

*Description of the Models gang from Sprawl-gangs & Megacorps (1990), an organizations sourcebook for Cyberspace.*

series of World of Darkness (WoD) took sex and sexuality among its main themes. WoD presented players with an unprecedented array of sexual encounter options, naturally including bloodsucking as the principal form of

having sex between vampires. These games unmistakably targeted a different audience, one that at least self-identified as more mature and more contemporary than earlier role-players. As Paul Mason has wryly noted:

[...] Vampire and its successors took role-playing out of its core constituency (which could perhaps be pithily, if unkindly, be described as Lord of the Rings-reading social inadequates) and established an alternative fief – in this case that of undead-obsessed ‘goths’.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, Michelle Nephew makes the argument that White Wolf, the publisher of *Vampire*, was consistently playing with fears of parents in order to position role-playing games as subversive.<sup>11</sup> The *Vampire* creators and the audience they attracted presented themselves as ‘alternative’ in every sense of the word. Black-dressing “gothic” people obviously welcomed homosexuals and other queer characters with open arms, even if just to join forces in gaining a subculturally significant status together.

Over the years World of Darkness-related publications not only included suggestive queer imagery (such as the opening image of this article from *Changeling: The Dreaming 2nd edition*), but they also extensively discussed queer sexualities. Especially the fictional parts which were meant to set the atmosphere and exemplary characters could be openly queer and non-normative. The text of the game is often defiant: these exemplary characters are politically inclined and they evoke ideas of positive discrimination. There is, especially in the early inclusions, an air of tokenism as oftentimes the whole point of having gay characters seems to be having gay characters. Interestingly, one also does get a feeling that many of these roles are actually written by gay people themselves.

In the 1990s, a lot more positive attributes start getting attached to queer characters in RPGs. For instance, in many source books from this decade the special power of homosexuals is being good-looking. These exemplary gay characters always have more Appearance points than the regular guy. The only officially ugly gay character in WoD is probably in the first *Clanbook: Nosferatu* (1993) clan book. Even gays are affected by putrefactive blood.

The influence of WoD in developing and distributing positive representations of queer characters cannot be overestimated. In a few short years the depictions

10. Paul Mason. “In Search of the Self. A Survey of the First 25 Years of Anglo-American Role-Playing Theory.” *Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination*. Edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros. Vantaa: Ropecon ry, 2004, pp. 1–14.

11. Nephew, 2003.

## EQUALIZER

**Quote:** *Why can't (lifts assailant by scruff of neck) we all just (shakes assailant like rat) get along! (tosses assailant against wall)*

**Prelude:** You had known you were different since you were a child, but your parents were strict and didn't talk about things like that. The other kids at school, however, had plenty of words: *faggot*, *queer*.

Then you went off to college and met Doug. Eloquent and outspoken, Doug was a member of ACT-UP and active in several on-campus gay-rights groups. With him, you felt comfortable about yourself for the first time. He brought you out of your shell and made you realize that the guilt you felt was the world's problem, not yours. Common cause blossomed into friendship and thereafter into romance.

Doug was, perhaps, too outspoken for his own good. It started when a truck tried to run the two of you down. As you hit the pavement, the truck screeched to a halt, and six guys — frat boys by the looks of them — jumped out. They carried lumber, chains, baseball bats — a melange of weapons — though the looks on their faces were identical. They hissed the old epithets at you: *faggot*, *queer*.

For you, it was over pretty quickly. You felt a beer bottle shatter along your right temple, and you barely even registered the rain of blows that cracked your back and ribs. You heard, as if underwater, Doug's faint, gurgling cries, and the impact of wood and metal and glass into flesh. You couldn't lift a finger to help him.

The pain engulfed you, subsided ... and then flared up again stronger than ever. You stared up through mist into the face (?) of the most repulsive creature you had even seen. Maybe the preacher was right after all; maybe you'd died and gone to hell.

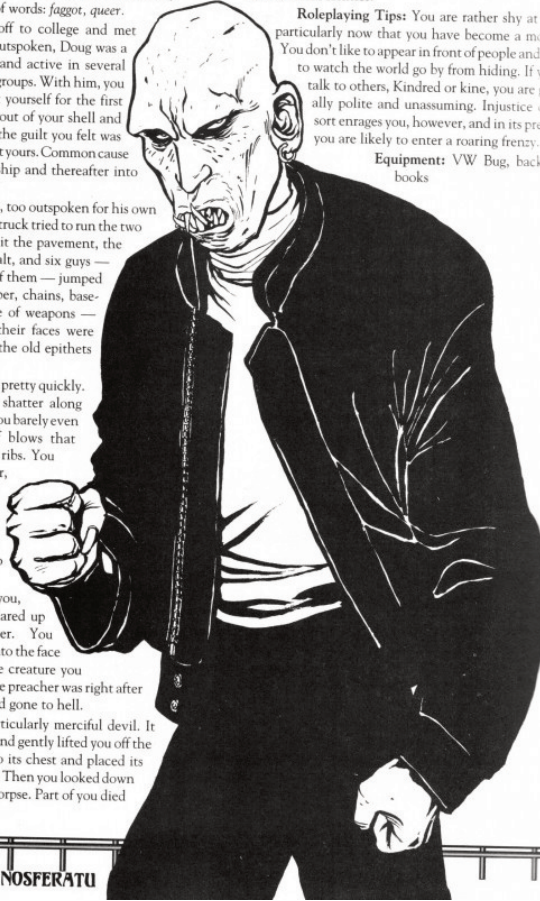
If so, this was a particularly merciful devil. It held out a cracked claw and gently lifted you off the ground. It cradled you to its chest and placed its wrist next to your mouth. Then you looked down and saw Doug's broken corpse. Part of you died

again in that moment. Ever since then, you have devoted your unlife to protecting the oppressed members of society — Kindred and kine alike.

**Concept:** You are a normal guy who has been hardened by the past few years. Your Attributes and Abilities reflect a fairly bright person with a decent education. You have learned quite a bit about "the system" and its hypocrisy, and this knowledge has led to the development of a few less-than-ethical Abilities.

**Roleplaying Tips:** You are rather shy at heart, particularly now that you have become a monster. You don't like to appear in front of people and prefer to watch the world go by from hiding. If you do talk to others, Kindred or kine, you are generally polite and unassuming. Injustice of any sort enrages you, however, and in its presence you are likely to enter a roaring frenzy.

**Equipment:** VW Bug, backpack, books



*Equalizer* from *Clanbook: Nosferatu* (1993) is a paradigmatic example of a character that is all about being gay.

of gay and other non-normative characters became normalized and publisher White Wolf had proven its open-mindedness and earned queer credentials. After that, gay characters could be portrayed as evil and strange again, but in

a more meaningful and humane manner. For example, in Vampire supplement *Montreal by Night* (1997), there is a gay Sabbat group called Queens of Mercy (that has ties to real world gay history) which beat up straight people. They also organize rituals for which they kidnap regular people, dress them up, and make them compete in absurd things like high-pitch screaming. In the end, these kidnappees are forced to act out the catfight between Joan Collins and Linda Evans from the TV show *Dynasty*.

### *Homosexual Fantasies*

While horror, cyberpunk, and some other genres started figuring and negotiating queer sexualities during the 1990s, the fantasy genre lagged behind. *Dungeons & Dragons* remained free of gay influences due to company policy. Not even the brothel description of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* hinted at queer sexualities. Perhaps most striking of all is the lack of homosexuality in *Theatrix Presents: Ironwood* (1995), which is an RPG adaptation of a pornographic comic with the same name. The role-playing game is surprisingly tame, and only hints faintly at homosexuality.

However, all of this does not mean that fantasy was completely free of homos. *Rolemaster: Shadow World* (1996) had a gay character and some world description, although only in the web supplement. In the source book of *Fading Suns: Lords of the Known Worlds* (1996), it is stated that the (fairly strict) church does not frown on any sexual orientation. *HårnMaster 2nd edition* (1996) has a table relating to character creation, where everyone has a 10 per cent chance of ending up gay or bisexual. In *Warhammer Fantasy Role-Play, 2nd Edition* (2005), there is an opaque reference to a count having taken a liking to a beautiful young man. Sometimes the references are so vague that they seem almost as if coded, and the designers would only confirm their intentions on internet forums.

The classic *Dungeons & Dragons* supplement of *The Temple of Elemental Evil* presents an interesting case. The original came out in 1985 and is obviously queer free. The sequel, *Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil* (2001) features an allusion to a closeted gay couple, Rufus and Burne. This is the relevant passage, describing their habitat:

*An inner wall identical to the curtain wall surrounds this main structure. It has towers with a single gate (same as those in the barbican), creating an inner bailey surrounding a keep, called the donjon. The donjon has four*

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*levels with a grand hall, a feast hall, a huge kitchen, many storerooms, an apartment for Rufus and Burne, a vast library, and guest chambers.*

We think it is fair to say that this quote does not exactly shout gay. Yet the principal author Monte Cook is sure about it:

*It was not the intention of the original creators of Rufus and Burne (who were PCs together and played through the adventure) that they were gay.*

*However, it was absolutely my intention to portray them as such in Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil (there's only the one bedchamber for them in the entire castle), without saying "and they're gay," which would be silly. (Silly because it's really not an issue, and because I didn't identify straight characters as such.)<sup>12</sup>*

As social mores were changing and other role-playing games started to include references to homosexuality, fantasy tried to keep up, but in a very covert way. However, player cultures were still not following the books, and that was starting to become visible when player creations achieved higher circulation and visibility due the expansion of computer networks.

### *Towards Rule 34*

In the mid-1990s, as the Internet was starting to figure in the lives of early adopters, fan supplements to role-playing games began to surface. The tone in these web publications was playful, as they featured spells like 'Mordenkainen's lubrication'. Some of these had openly sexual themes, such as (the unofficial) *GURPS Sex* (1993) and *The Complete Guide to Unlawful Carnal Knowledge* (1996). The latter compared homosexual relations to interracial marriages (such as human-elf) and featured an essay on the topic of, 'has anyone played a homosexual character'. It also suggested plot points such as 'reverse rape' (described as a gay man raped by a woman). The guide contained a tongue-in-cheek reference to choices of professions for gay people:

*Homosexuals are, however, rumored to be found in disproportionately high numbers among certain groups, such as adventurers, who have often been*

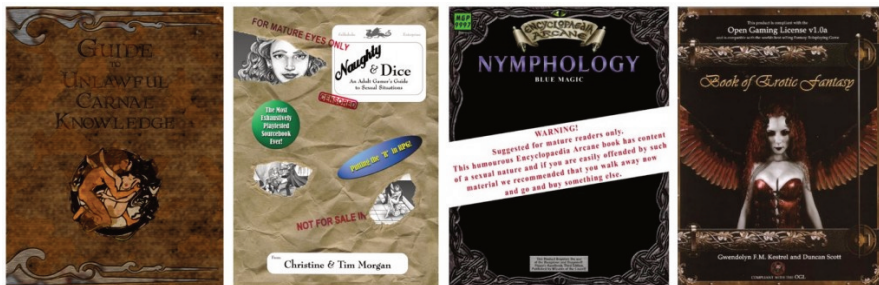
12. Cook quoted from webforum ENWorld. <http://www.enworld.org/forum/showthread.php?157547-Gay-PCs-or-NPCs/page8&p=2746140&viewfull=1#post2746140>. Interestingly, in the computer game version of Temple of Elemental Evil (2003) there is a gay sub-plot (one of the first in videogames): a pirate named Berham openly flirts with his male gaming buddies, promising eternal love and worship if he is freed from the hands of his captain.

*driven to adventure because they couldn't quite fit into normal society, and the priesthoods of faiths which require celibacy, since the priests never need to explain their lack of interest in conventional marriage.*

After the year 2000, there was a rush to publish general RPG supplements on sexuality. Some of these tried to take advantage of the open d20 license, but a “quality standard” provision was added in time to prevent *Book of Erotic Fantasy* (2003) from being issued under the license. The book contains a passage that recalls the description of beliefs from D&D red box:

*Sexual orientation has no impact whatsoever on a character's ability scores, fighting prowess, spellcasting, class abilities (with the exception of prestige classes that might require a character to be one sexual preference or another), or other mechanics of the game. A gay character lives, eats, and breathes like anyone else and can be kind, just, cruel, selfish, loving, haughty, or amusing... just like anyone else.*

It is interesting to note this supplement explicating that out of all ‘humanoid races, humans tend to be the most diverse sexually.’ Other sex supplements published around that time included a new version of *The Guide to Unlawful Carnal Knowledge* (2003) and *Nymphology* (2003); *Naughty and Dice* (2003) was based on *GURPS Sex*. Some of books had well-meaning and inclusive takes on queer sexualities, although the texts were seldom particularly insightful.



Four general supplements for sexuality in role-playing games from 2003.

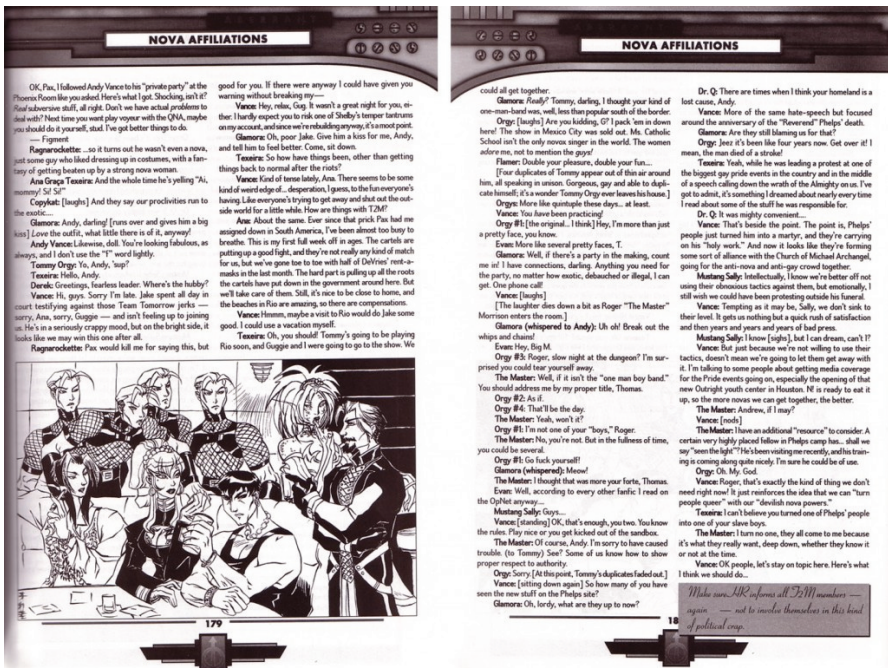
### *We're Here! We're Queer!*

In the early 2000s, the representations of queer identities in RPGs proliferated. Although core fantasy was still largely a no homo zone, most other genres were interspersed with a wild bunch of non-normative characters, too.



Throughout the nineties, GURPS had continued to occasionally feature setting-appropriate mentions of homosexuality. Usually the tone was very matter-of-fact, trying not to make a big spectacle of the gay content. Gradually, queer representations started to become more varied and more prominent. Particularly, the publisher White Wolf continued on this track with its superhero game *Aberrant* (1999), where many of the primary supplements had prominent gay characters, some of who were also tied to the metaplot of the setting. Sometimes the representations went a bit over the top, though. In *Aberrant*, a wish-fulfillment power fantasy, the wishes being fulfilled are certainly fairly stereotypical.

In *Player's Guide* (2000), a gay superhero game *Queer Nova Alliance* is introduced. Its gang members include a once-bullied nightclub owner from Ibiza named Ironskin, a drag queen named Glamora, BDSM-related character called The Master, the protector of San Francisco named Rainbow, and self-cloning Tommy Orgy. In this game, the most powerful guy in the world, Divis Mal, also happens to be gay, although he is not a member of this posse.



Transcript of a meeting of the Queer Nova Alliance, from *Aberrant: Player's Guide* (2000).

After the turn of the millennium the representation of queer sexualities seemed

to start to normalize in role-playing game source books. For example *Blue Planet 2nd Edition Player's Guide* (2000), *Love and War* (2003), *Mutants & Masterminds: Freedom City* (2003), *Unknown Armies 2nd Edition* (2002) all feature queer content. It seems that a key factor is the publisher; some publishers (e.g. Green Ronin, White Wolf, Atlas Games, Steve Jackson Games) considered queer people a part of their audience. Sometimes the wording in these source books is still awkward, but the intent seems inclusive, although representations of gay male sexuality are obviously much more prominent and varied than, say, those of transgender people.

At the very end of the period under scrutiny here is one more source book that should be discussed for its progressive, yet gratuitous depictions of queer sexuality. *Blue Rose* (2005) belongs to the genre of “romantic fantasy”, and it is decisively targeted at female players. The world it portrays is based on feminist and egalitarian principles in the style of Mercedes Lackey, Diane Duane, and Tamora Pierce. As in these books, this game is rife with sensitive and lovable gay boys. The source book has names for different kinds of love – heterosexual (*cepia luath*) and homosexual (*caria daunen*) – and makes a point saying that same-sex love was born in myths before straight love. The introductory adventure in the core book features young boys who are secretly in love with each other.<sup>13</sup>

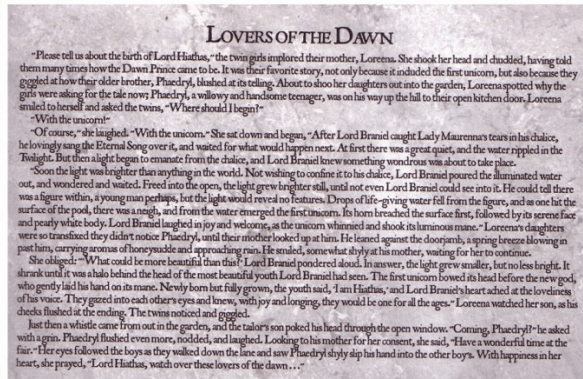
It thus seems that in the 2000s it is possible to have a strongly queer-themed role-playing game out in the market, and nobody thinks twice about it. Whereas in most RPGs queer relations are relatively easy to bypass if the players are not interested in trying them out, in *Blue Rose* that may not be possible. If one would really try, the same-sex couples depicted in the book could perhaps be interpreted as “just friends”, but rewriting the central world-shaping mythos would take a lot of effort. Why even consider such an option? The discussion on the general acceptability of such queer thematics is clearly indicative of the history of role-playing games, which has not been inclusive or unbiased towards such content for a very long time.

### *Possible People*

On the basis of our observations, it is clear that the role-playing game industry has been rather conservative overall when it comes to representations of queer sexuality. Here we have searched for queer sexualities in role-playing game

13. Another noteworthy RPG source book published in 2005 is *Wraethu: From Enchantment to Fulfilment*, based on the *Wraethu* novels by Storm Constantine. The game features male humans transformed into *hara*, an androgynous hermaphrodite species. Sexual themes are present.





*Blue Rose (2005) mythos explains the birth of homosexual love.*

source books, but a key question remains: Do queer characters matter and if yes, to whom?

More specifically, does representation of queer sexualities – and identification with and as the characters – matter? Adrienne Shaw's book *Gaming at the Edge*, an ethnography of queer players of offline digital games, shows that representation and identification are complex issues, and often players do not even seem to care about representation. Based on just reading role-playing game source books we are unable to comment if the same applies to role-playing games. However, if role-playing games are not just about exploration and conquest, but feature societal and personal themes, then we would tend to think that representation and identification have to be important for many players.

The literature on immersion and experience in the larp context supports this,<sup>14</sup> and so does the media panic rhetoric around role-playing games about players identifying too strongly with their characters and getting stuck in them.<sup>15</sup> One reason for this difference is that in analog role-playing games the character has a stronger presence and is more personal as players have

14. For examples, see: Heidi Hopemetsä. "24 Hours in a Bomb Shelter. Player, Character and Immersion in Ground Zero." *Playground Worlds. Creating and Evaluating Experiences of Role-Playing Games*. Edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros. Helsinki: Ropecon ry, 2008, pp. 187–198. Markus Montola. "The positive negative experience in extreme role-playing." *Proceedings of DiGRA 2010 Conference. Experiencing Games: Games, Play, and Players*. Stockholm, Sweden, 16–17 August, 2010. Jaakko Stenros. "Behind Games: Playful Mindsets and Transformative Practices." *Gameful World. Approaches, Issues, Applications*. Edited by Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015, pp. 201–222.

15. Nephew, 2003.

more agency in their creation and actions. On the other hand, in one emic theory of role-playing from the discussion forum The Forge, there are different stances towards how a player arrives at the decision concerning the character's action.<sup>16</sup> Stances include *Actor* (using only the knowledge of a character), *Author/Pawn* (decision based on player preference), and *Director* (affecting not just the character but the environment). It is interesting to note that none of these stances require identification with the character. In terms of play studies this implies that role-playing does not need to be pretend play (playing as if someone else), but can be and often is carried out as object play (play with conceptual objects, in this case characters).<sup>17</sup>

Even if identification were to be unimportant, through the concept of representation it is possible to think about what kinds of existences are *possible* in games. In her book, Shaw lists three arguments for representation: seeing people "like them" in media, seeing people unlike them (in order to educate about plurality), and seeing who is possible. It is this third category that seems most appealing to us and relevant in the study of role-playing game source books. These books are basically game rules; they delineate what the games and game worlds are like. Having any kind of queer presence signals that the game worlds can and do include queer people. Opening this kind of possibility space seems quite important. However, this remains speculation without proper player studies.

### *Conclusions*

In this article we have started to construct an alternative history of role-playing game source books, one that shows that queer people have been and are possible in various game worlds at least since the late 1980s. Even when the terminology used and values embedded are questionable by contemporary standards, the inclusion of queer people signals the possibility of such lives in fictional settings.

For a long while, character actions and behaviors not directly related to questing and adventuring were not described in the worlds of role-playing games – or at least in the source books these practices were based upon. Questions of faith and activities such as eating were sometimes explicitly defined as not being relevant for role-play, even if characters were

16. Ron Edwards, "GNS and Other Matters of Role-Playing Theory." The Forge. The Internet Home for Independent Role-Playing Games. 2001. Online at <http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/4/>

17. Stenos, 2005; see also Gordon M. Burghardt. *The Genesis of Animal Play. Testing the Limits.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006.

representatives of religions and there were rules for the consumption, purchasing, and demand of food as fuel. As these canvases of role-playing games started to become more varied, also sexuality began to play a more prominent role in them. The emphasis was no longer in simply approaching the character as a cursor in a fantastic world, but a plausible, possible character – a persona. Yet queer sexualities were usually completely absent from these texts, or they were in the end associated with derangement, chaos, and evil.

The influence of individual game designers and authors has no doubt been important, even in cases of many of the representations today being regarded as rather negative. The context where some companies had strict rules about the total erasure of queers even tiny mentions may have been important victories at the time. Even the most fleeting mention, a veiled remark, would signal that the game world does indeed feature queer people. However, grasping the importance of such occurrences cannot be achieved through studying the source books alone. Later the influence of player practices has grown, especially as the significance of internet has increased – although player debates in gaming related periodicals were significant from the beginning. It is evident that the more adventurous material usually emerges from fan forums.

It is worth noting that although the presence of homosexuals has grown and the handling of queer themes has become more nuanced during the period under scrutiny, intersectionality is still largely missing. As is evident from the examples in this article, for example, male homosexuals are predominantly white. Questions of ethnicity, although present in discussion around fantasy literature, did not seem to influence queers in source books in any significant manner during the first three decades of RPGs.

This is not to say, however, that role-playing games would be disintegrated with the world around them. Relevant to the queer context, the HIV/AIDS crisis was reflected in RPGs, although much of that was filtered through horror literature. Instead of being at the forefront of issues of representation and inclusion, RPGs have mostly followed trends emerging elsewhere in popular culture. Even the arguably most blatantly gay role-playing game from the period under scrutiny, *Blue Rose*, simply continues the thread where traditionally conservative and conventional role-playing games are becoming more inclusive due to adaptations from other media, in this case a specific fantasy sub-genre interested in gay characters. The *Wild Cards* RPG was one of the firsts to feature an explicit homosexual character, and *Vampire: The Masquerade* certainly owns a significant debt to the homoeroticism of Anne Rice's vampire novels.

To sum up, the early role-playing games silenced queer sexualities

completely, on the grounds of not being relevant for the gameplay. An approach that has followed, and that is still relevant, is that of veiled mentions. Queers are possible in the fiction if the reader pays close attention to the choice of words. There have also been blatant, agenda driven uses of queers, both arguing that queers are an abomination, and ones proclaiming inclusivity and alternativity. More recently, the inclusions of queer sexualities have been more matter-of-fact, described without underlining – unless queerness has somehow been a key theme in the game setting. The first three decades of role-playing game source books have shown us, how representations of queer sexuality have moved from the complete darkness of dungeons out into the open.



# Reimagining Disability in Role-Playing Games

Elsa S. Henry

Role-playing games have a fraught relationship with disability. Take *Numenera* (2013) as an example: the game is set in a world where scientists have continued the project of eugenics, endeavoring to “perfect” the human form. This setting effectively erases disability from *Numenera’s* cyberpunk future. Here, disabled bodies are rendered invisible and therefore undesirable and unplayable. But while eugenics may lie far from the concerns of able-bodied designers, for disabled players, seeing eugenics succeed is not interesting. It is terrifying. *Numenera*, however, marks only one case where the problematic of disability in role-playing games is particularly clear. This essay analyzes the ways that disability is handled within the *World of Darkness* setting in order to articulate some common problems with the implementation of disability in role-playing games.

To address this issue, I must speak to my own experience as a gamer. I started gaming in my teens. My friends were really into *World of Darkness*, which is a role-play setting that includes vampires, wraiths, mummies, werewolves and other fantastical creatures. That is where I began. This was my first introduction to the concept of point-based disabilities—my disabilities were reduced to points. When I was creating my first character, I saw listed next to things like “wrathful” and “alcoholic,” the word “blind.” Blindness here was reduced to a flat five point negative. I was blind, but I did not feel like it was a flaw, I felt like it was just a part of who I was. Blindness is not the only “flaw” available for players to take. Interested players are offered a veritable buffet of “flaws” to choose from. Does placing point values on disability really help players to understand how to best perform disability in a game?

I discuss two specific games, both from the *World of Darkness* setting—*Changeling: The Dreaming* (1997, about faeries) and *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1998, about vampires). In each there are various groups to which players can belong. In both *Vampire* and in *Changeling*, the games allow players to take “flaws” which are related to disability. These flaws include deafness, blindness, bad sight, and many mental health conditions. Problematically, all of these “flaws” are boiled down to a number of points. Players can take up to a certain number of “flaws” in exchange for points that can be redeemed

for abilities they want. These supposedly “positive” abilities typically relate to driving, extra health, or attractiveness.

The “flaw” system fails to account for both the real-life struggles of disabled individuals and the medical science of their conditions. Here is how *Changeling: The Dreaming* treats lame characters:

*Lame: (3 points, Flaw) Your legs are injured or otherwise prevented from working effectively. You suffer a two dice penalty to all dice rolls related to movement. A character may not take this Flaw along with the Merit Double Jointed.*<sup>1</sup>

There are a number of issues with this quote, but the biggest one to start with is that of the language. The word “lame” has been used by the medical system to refer to people with various disabilities or disorders, and historically it was considered a negative term.<sup>2</sup> This term is identified by people in the disability rights movement, and in the academic work of “crip theory” as problematic and insensitive, especially given the colloquial use of the word. Furthermore, the game’s restriction of not being able to also be double jointed with this “flaw” is a bit harsh given that this is not paralysis, this is a leg issue. No mention of canes or anything is made, and this is a flat-out dismissive oversight. For example, a person with Cystic Fibrosis might use canes, cuffed to their forearms and then grips for the hands below. This does not say anything about what their arms can do, and in fact, their arms may be stronger from the constant load-bearing use. One can be double jointed in an arm but not double jointed in the legs. Restricting such things makes it seem as though a disability affects the whole body, rather than certain areas. Some disabilities do affect the whole body at large, but others do not.

When you are a disabled gamer, systems like this feel like they are placing point values on a large part of your life.

I have Congenital Rubella Syndrome with the full trifecta of symptoms. I am legally blind, I am deaf, I wear a hearing aid, and I have cardiac issues that were mostly resolved in my infancy. Additionally, I live with chronic pain and post-traumatic stress disorder. I have been disabled my whole life, and aside from the time before the traumatic onset of my PTSD, I have never lived any other way. For me, being disabled is not just an illness or an inconvenience, it

1. Richard Dansky, Brian Campbell, Jackie Cassada, and Ian Lemke. *Changeling the Dreaming* 2nd edition. Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing, 1997, p.169.

2. s. e. smith. "Ableist Word Profile: Lame." <http://disabledfeminists.com/2009/10/12/ableist-word-profile-lame/>

is an important part of my identity. Disabled politics are my politics. Disabled communities are my communities. It is important for me that game designers treat disability with the sensitivity and respect it deserves.

Disabilities are at best neglected by players over the course of a game, and at worst used as a punch line for a bad joke. I have seen people take “blindness” as a character trait and never use it. In one game of *Vampire*, a paralyzed character claimed that they did not have to actually use a wheelchair because they were only paralyzed before they became a vampire. *Changeling* characters use magic to get out of their disabilities in the same way. For example, a wheelchair using Mage might simply cast a healing spell on himself and then walk. Or a cyberpunk genre game ends up with a blind character who after two sessions decides to get sight augmentations, thus entirely negating the point of taking blindness as a character trait.

*World of Darkness* is not the only system that is culpable for mistakes made with regard to disability in games. Newer systems are also at fault, and perhaps even in more problematic ways. Where *World of Darkness* places disability within the text at a point value system, Vincent D. Baker’s *Apocalypse World* (2010) has them listed as “debilities” – permanent flaws to your character when they have sustained large amounts of damage. While I love *Apocalypse World* as a system because of its mutability in the context of queerness (*Monsterhearts*) and in the way that it allows for big stories with competent characters, it certainly does not leave room for playing a disabled character from the very beginning. By removing the option, *Apocalypse World* essentializes disability as a bad thing that happens to you and not a regular part of the character’s experience with the world.

Gaming is supposed to be fun. But when you start out with a character creation system which takes something that impacts your life as much as say, blindness does, and reduces it to a five point flaw, it hurts. It hurts because it feels a lot like erasure. I have never been able to see myself as a character in a game. And while some people have gotten to play a variant of themselves in say, a *Seventh Sea* (1999) game, I have never done so. I have never gotten to play a bad-ass blind and deaf character who swashbuckles, or who is a ghost, an angel, or a vampire. There is little space for disabled characters because games are most frequently written and played by white, cis-gender, heterosexual, able-bodied men. Their experiences are frequently limited to the stories they can access, and the stories that they themselves want to play out.

It is important for people to be able to see themselves in the games that they play, even if they do not want to play a version of themselves. By this I



mean that it is psychologically important to feel as though you are a part of the universe in which your story is set. One of the games which I can point to and say that I feel psychologically attached is *Wraith* (1998) from *World of Darkness*. *Wraith* has never had disability as a part of the system, but the fact of the matter is that it did not really need to. Here, players take on the role of a specter which must almost single-mindedly focus their energy around a singular object in the world – a memento of their past self. This plot structure is accessible to players of all sorts. In fact, *Wraith* was meaningful to me because it helped me grieve my father's death, and it was meaningful to me because I could see my fellow disabled people as a part of the game. Death is something that people of all abilities, creeds, races, sexualities, and genders experience. There is not anything implicit or obvious about inclusion in *Wraith*; the game resonates because it focuses on an experience we all face, death. Other systems like *World of Darkness* and *Apocalypse World* obscure death within systems of coercion and combat, which in the real world are the vocations of a patriarchal elite.

Inclusion means more than assuming that one is included, it means being named.

Many disabled gamers feel left out of the equation because implicit inclusion does not feel like inclusion. Inclusion means more than assuming that one is included, it means being named. Frequently, disabled gamers talk to each other within closed gaming forums – such as the Disabled Gamers page on Facebook. Places where it is safe for us to discuss what we are not getting out of games, because in the public sphere, harassment is a problem for all of us. By reducing disabled identities to marginal paragraphs and point values, the gaming market itself is losing out on a whole group of players waiting in the wings to play. As a disabled gamer, who works with other disabled gamers, and who consistently pushes the agenda, the only question I ever get is: “Why should we bother?”

Well, we should bother because the world of games has changed drastically since the first publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* in the 1970s. Where we are now is a place where we should diversify and accept that our culture and hobby is growing. We can do this by changing the way that games look at disabilities. They are not flaws, or blockades to the heroism we want to play out. They are not antithetical to the adventurers we play, or the knights who save the realm. A disabled knight is still a knight, her ability—whether or not she can hear—is a part of her physical representation. Disabilities should be written into games as a part of the space, a part of regular play, not as a flaw which does not acknowledge that disability is more than just physical: it is an identity we carry with us from day to day.

# Role-Playing the Caper-Gone-Wrong Film in Fiasco

Felan Parker

Like mainstream role-playing games, many indie RPGs situate themselves in relation to familiar genres and settings from other cultural forms: Tolkienian fantasy in *Burning Wheel* (2002), post-apocalyptic fiction in *Apocalypse World* (2010), silver age superheroes in *ICONS* (2010), and so forth.<sup>1</sup> A handful of these games go one step further, however, simulating not only the kinds of stories told in other media, but also the narrative form of those stories. Jason Morningstar's *Fiasco* (2009) is one RPG that succeeds at this approach. The game simulates the kind of blackly comic, often excessively violent caper-gone-wrong films – or what J.P. Telotte calls “fatal capers” – associated especially with the Coen brothers, but also with Quentin Tarantino (*Pulp Fiction*, 1994), Guy Ritchie (*Snatch*, 2000) and others.<sup>2</sup> “The typical Coenian narrative,” R. Barton Palmer argues, “focuses either on pathetic losers whose attempts to make a ‘big score’ of some kind spectacularly misfire, or on those of more virtue or purer heart who in their cunning or simplicity persevere to transcendence of some kind.”<sup>3</sup> The text of *Fiasco* describes the material of the game itself in similar terms:

*“Fiasco is inspired by cinematic tales of small-time capers gone disastrously wrong – particularly films like Blood Simple, Fargo, The Way of the Gun, Burn After Reading, and A Simple Plan. You’ll play ordinary people with powerful ambition and poor impulse control. There will be big dreams and flawed execution. It won’t go well for them, to put it mildly, and in the end it will probably collapse into a glorious heap of jealousy, murder, and recrimination. Lives and reputations will be lost,*

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Film Studies Association of Canada in 2012. [https://www.academia.edu/4530327/The\\_Set-Up\\_the\\_Tilt\\_and\\_the\\_Aftermath\\_Role-playing\\_the\\_Caper-Gone-Wrong\\_Film\\_in\\_Fiasco](https://www.academia.edu/4530327/The_Set-Up_the_Tilt_and_the_Aftermath_Role-playing_the_Caper-Gone-Wrong_Film_in_Fiasco).

2. J. P. Telotte. “Fatal Capers: Strategy and Enigma in Film Noir.” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 23.4 (1996), pp. 163-71.

3. R. Barton Palmer. Joel and Ethan Coen. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004, p. 54.

*painful wisdom will be gained, and if you are really lucky, your guy just might end up back where he started.*<sup>4</sup>

*Fiasco* can be seen as a sort of colloquial, playable form of film criticism: the game must establish certain theoretical premises about caper-gone-wrong films and how they work in order to simulate the sub-genre in terms of a system of game rules. Because it produces a simulation, this game system is selective and simplified. Nevertheless, simulations are value-laden and never neutral, always highlighting and de-emphasizing aspects of the source system.<sup>5</sup> To say that *Fiasco* simulates the Coenian caper film means that the game presents a specific conception or interpretation of the forms and conventions of the films that inspired it.

I will not rehearse the rules and gameplay of *Fiasco* here. The rulebook is concise and very readable, and “actual play” accounts of *Fiasco* sessions can be found elsewhere, such as the full session featured in the popular webseries *Tabletop*.

In the execution of its gameplay mechanics, *Fiasco* simulates – with surprising reliability and verisimilitude – Coen brothers-style fatal caper films. Rather than adapting any one film or story – although who would not play *Fargo: The Game?* – the game is instead grounded in general themes and principles that are presumed to guide this kind of filmic narrative. Joris Dormans argues that the rules of a role-playing game suggest a certain style of play, and are conducive to certain kinds of stories.<sup>6</sup> The rules of *Fiasco* – like many indie RPGs – are specifically designed to “match” its subject matter as closely as possible. As indicated by the terminology used in the rulebook – setups, scenes and acts, flashbacks, montages, and so on – *Fiasco* actively encourages players to imagine the story in the form of a film playing out.<sup>7</sup> The paratextual presentation of the game helps reinforce this cinematic framing. The rulebook and playsets are designed in the style of Saul Bass movie posters (and in particular, the Bass-inspired poster for the Coens’ *Burn After Reading*, 2008), and

4. Jason Morningstar. *Fiasco*. Chapel Hill, NC: Bully Pulpit Games and Amusements, 2010, p. 8.

5. Ian Bogost. *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006, pp. 98–99.

6. Joris Dormans. “On the Role of the Die: A brief ludologic study of pen-and-paper roleplaying games and their rules.” *Game Studies* 6.1 (2006). <http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/dormans>.

7. Other RPGs that notably use cinematic framing devices include James Bond 007 (1983) and Feng Shui (1996). *Primetime Adventures* (2004), similarly, uses the language of ensemble television series, dividing the action into scenes, episodes, and seasons, presided over by a Producer.

the text is peppered with no less than 56 movie quotes and references, ranging from canonical to obscure.



Poster for Otto Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959) designed by Saul Bass. Original copyright held by Columbia Pictures, 1959.

In addition to a paragraph of “flavor text” to be read aloud to establish the setting and mood, each playset comes with a handful of “Movie Night” suggestions suited to the specific setting or genre – the Transatlantic ocean liner playset lists *Bitter Moon* (1992), *Legend of 1900* (1998), *Titanic* (1997), *Duck Soup* (1933), *The Impostors* (1998), *The Love Boat* (1976), *Poseidon Adventure* (2005), and *Deep Rising* (1998).

As noted above, simulations are not direct or simple copies of their objects. Rather, they translate, adapt, interpret, and represent the source material in



A comparison between respective Saul Bass emulations: the *Fiasco* RPG (left) and the *Burn After Reading* poster (right). *Fiasco* Cover by John Harper, 2009. Art direction for *Burn After Reading* poster by David Swayze, 2008, Copyright Working Title Films.

terms of another system. Cinematic conventions can be expressed through the rule-based system of a game and – in order to be generative of dynamic play situations – these rules need to produce a specific range of genre-appropriate possibilities. It is in this sense that I contend that *Fiasco* is a form of criticism that presents a cinematic account of a caper-gone-wrong. The game’s conception of cinematic narrative is fairly structural and formulaic, with plot elements divided neatly into different categories that interact in various ways. *Fiasco* conceives of the caper-gone-wrong film not so much as a sub-genre, but as a *sur-genre*, a narrative pattern that can be identified and mapped onto many different kinds of films. *Fiasco*, through its rules and textual framing, pragmatically constructs a category – what might be called the “fiasco film” – making it both sensible and playable. This simulation is based on three over-arching themes or concerns that *Fiasco* positions as central to the caper-gone-wrong film: black humor, fate, and chaotic breakdown.

While nothing in *Fiasco* necessarily guarantees that it will generate a darkly humorous story every time – the game could be played “straight” to tell a cold,

serious story along the lines of, say, *Mystic River* (2003) or *Heat* (1995)– the paratextual framing and the plot elements included in most playsets certainly encourage an ironic approach.<sup>8</sup> Palmer points to the Coens' use of "farcical violence and regional stereotypes" as a primary source of humor, to which I would add genre stereotypes and Hollywood clichés, particularly in films like *Burn After Reading* and *The Ladykillers* (2004).<sup>9</sup> In the supplementary rulebook *The Fiasco Companion*, this kind of over-the-top black comedy is referred to as "gonzo": "Shooting drug dealers inside a tornado is gonzo," for example.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the more outrageous moments in films like *Pulp Fiction* or *Snatch* rely on precisely their farcical absurdity to make the audience cringe and laugh. Even when the game is played with more restraint and grounding in realism, however, perverse irony and dark humor almost inevitably seeps into the narrative. Telotte explores the links between the post-modern fatal caper and film noir, arguing that the sarcasm and irony that pervades *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) represents both an intensification of the shadowy, violent visions of film noir and an ironic distancing from its bleak subject matter.<sup>11</sup> Thomas Leitch contends that, far more than other genres of film comedy, the films of the Coen brothers depend on their "ruthlessly stylized visuals" – and the detachment they engender – for humor.<sup>12</sup>

While *Fiasco* does not have visual imagery in the filmic sense, Michael Ryan Skolnik has argued that the peculiar aesthetics of tabletop role-playing games, contrary to popular discourses of immersion in a fictional world, skew closer to the anti-immersive, defamiliarizing drama of Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal with their disjunctive flow and self-reflexive performativity.<sup>13</sup> *Fiasco's* system of rules takes advantage of the distancing inherent in the medium. The game emphasizes archetypal characters and settings, literally random (and often absurd) plot elements ("Forty chickens in eighty cages"), with its overall tone and presentation encouraging the kind

8. For more on paratextual framing in RPGs, see David Jara. "A Closer Look at the (Rule-) Books: Framings and Paratexts in Tabletop Role-playing Games." *International Journal of Role-playing* 4 (2013). <http://www.ijrp.subcultures.nl/wp-content/issue4/IJRPissue4jara.pdf>

9. Palmer, p. 95.

10. Jason Morningstar and Steve Segedy. *The Fiasco Companion*. Chapel Hill, NC: Bully Pulpit Games and Amusements, 2011, p. 17.

11. Telotte, p. 164.

12. Thomas Leitch. *Crime Films*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 279.

13. Michael Ryan Skolnik. "The Anti-Immersive Theatre of Role-Playing Games." *Proceedings of the International Conference for Meaningful Play*. East Lansing, MI: Meaningful Play, 2008. Online. [http://meaningfulplay.msu.edu/proceedings2008/mp2008\\_paper\\_90.pdf](http://meaningfulplay.msu.edu/proceedings2008/mp2008_paper_90.pdf)

of ironic distance produced by the Coens' visual style. Leitch goes on to say that "ambiguity and irresolution are at the heart of *Fargo's* comedy, which [...] works by systematically depriving viewers of any single privileged perspective from which to interpret its outrageous events."<sup>14</sup> In *Fiasco*, the constant shifting from viewpoint to viewpoint, the shared control over the setting, plot and characters, and the jarring mid-game Tilt phase – which introduces new, destabilizing narrative elements – ensure that the story is never simple or linear. Palmer claims that "To laugh, we must withdraw from what we witness. Black humor is always, for this reason, a joke on us as well."<sup>15</sup> Playing *Fiasco* is as much about telling bleakly funny and violent stories as it is about implicating each other in the joke, as players try to cajole and one-up one another into more and more gonzo plot developments, and still-darker and more startlingly graphic fates for their characters.

"That the caper might end in death, then, is hardly a surprise," Telotte writes of the fatal caper film, pointing to another inheritance of film noir: the inevitability and unpredictability of its ambiguous world.<sup>16</sup> The sense of "relentless causality" in these stories is paired with a profoundly enigmatic sense of contingency; fate is inexorable and chance is cruel and vindictive.<sup>17</sup> The fatalistic undertones of the caper-gone-wrong are highlighted right from the set-up in *Fiasco*, in which every character begins not as an individual, but a node in a randomly-generated network of relationships, needs, locations, and objects. These plot elements in many ways have more agency than the characters derived from them, as they act upon the characters through the players, determining the range of possible identities available to them, and constituting their roles in the story. As Palmer is quick to point out, however:

*"none of these films imagines a strictly deterministic universe, whose inhabitants are crushed by both random mischance and the unreliability of what knowledge they manage to attain. If their plans fail, and they always do, it is as much the result of their bungling, irresolution, or venality."*<sup>18</sup>

Like it says in the rules, "poor impulse control" characterizes most of the protagonists in a caper-gone-wrong film, and much of the fun of *Fiasco* is in making and playing out terrible choices for them. The game is structured

14. Leitch, p. 283.

15. Palmer, p. 101.

16. Telotte, p. 164.

17. Palmer, p. 100.

18. Palmer, p. 80.

such that, by the time the Tilt comes around, the players should already have made a series of increasingly poor decisions. If they have not, the escalating Tilt elements will ensure that they start very soon. As Leitch suggests, the characters in caper-gone-wrong films are willfully ignorant of “what must seem to most viewers blindingly obvious generic cues,” choosing instead to continue along their doomed paths.<sup>19</sup>

The most direct way *Fiasco* simulates this narrative combination of foolishness, determinism, and contingency is the Fate Dice mechanic, whereby players amass dice that chart the downward spirals (or unexpected good fortunes) of their characters, ultimately deciding their fate. The Fate Dice are simultaneously representative of the players’ choices and decisions, as well as out of the players’ control, since the Tilt table or a low roll in the conclusive Aftermath phase can thwart even the most well-laid plans.

In the end, it all falls apart, and in many ways this is the aspect of the caper-gone-wrong film upon which *Fiasco* places the greatest emphasis. The game’s entire system is focused on what Telotte describes as the inevitable catastrophic breakdown of social action and planning in favor of individual aims and survival.<sup>20</sup> Unlike the classical noir, in which the status quo is ultimately reasserted (however tenuously), the fatal caper presents a deeply enigmatic and futile conclusion.<sup>21</sup> The facade of normalcy in the settings established by the core *Fiasco* playsets – a nice Southern town, flyover country USA, etc. – is violently shattered by the resulting fiasco. The probabilities of the final Aftermath dice roll ensure that most characters end up somewhere in the middle, with merely sad or pathetic outcomes, and one or two faced with a truly horrible fate. If a player does end up with a lucky high roll, it often translates in the fiction into a *deus ex machina* that brings them unexpected success, salvation or wealth. While in other kinds of narratives this would be frustrating, in the caper-gone-wrong it delightfully reinforces the themes of inexorability and ambiguity, not to mention the ironic distancing described above. As Palmer says of the Coen brothers’ protagonists: “They become reconciled to dissatisfaction. Capable, at best, only of ironized victories.”<sup>22</sup> In *Fiasco*, these victories are not earned or even intended, and almost always come at the expense of others.

The central mechanics of *Fiasco*, the overall structure of gameplay, and the

19. Leitch, p. 284.

20. Telotte, p. 167.

21. Telotte, p. 164.

22. Palmer, p. 39.



specific kinds of plot elements that the game deploys work in tandem with the Saul Bass-style presentation of the game and references to films that inspired it in order to help players produce a shared, imaginary caper-gone-wrong movie, scene by scene. The rules and gameplay of *Fiasco* offer not only a satisfying, hilarious, and highly enjoyable simulation of the fatal caper film, but also a compelling, workable and surprisingly nuanced account of the sub-genre that resonates strongly with critical and academic interpretations. Palmer argues that the power of the Coen brothers' films lies in their "postmodern doubleness," which allows them to tell the truth "about fiction with fiction."<sup>23</sup> These stories function as grimly funny, deeply ironic depictions of human frailty and failure, but also as serious commentary on cinematic stories and the mechanisms of storytelling.<sup>24</sup> By the same token, those strange, intermedial texts that occupy the intersections between different cultural forms, such as *Fiasco*, perform a double function as both enthusiastic tributes and critical interrogations. Just as caper-gone-wrong tropes circulate outside of cinema, the *idea* of cinema as a medium circulates in and through other cultural forms, and *Fiasco* invites players to thoughtfully and playfully explore the complex processes at work in cinematic genre narratives.

23. Palmer, p. 102.

24. Palmer, pp. 81, 102.

# Live Action



# The Trouble with Gender in Larp

Maury Elizabeth Brown & Benjamin A. Morrow

While representations of gender have received attention for most media, stories, and games, the topic of gender in live action role-playing games (larps) is particularly important because of the degree of embodiment that is uniquely characteristic of the medium. When role-playing a (gendered) character, the player's own body is at play, a fact that tends to constrain the performance, as both out-of-game and in-game expectations of attributes such as beauty, strength, leadership, and friendliness create restrictions on what is considered an authentic, true, or "real" performance of masculinity or femininity. This standard of believability in larp derives from powerful social norms and thus tends to reify the dominant gender binary of feminine=female and masculine=male as well as heterosexual relationships as the default. In this essay, we will explore the affordances of two approaches to writing and casting gendered characters in theatre-style larps<sup>1</sup> in order to demonstrate how they each replicate or subvert dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality, and how larp may open a space for performances of possibility: a wider range of genders, sexualities, and bodies that portray them.

First, we will address the theoretical foundations that inform this approach to understanding gender as performance. Next, we will address two styles of game design in theatre-style larps. Although there are many genres and styles of larp, we will be specifically examining theatre-style larps that feature characters that are pre-written by a game designer, as opposed to campaign<sup>2</sup> or boffer larps<sup>3</sup>—which use player-generated character creation techniques based on hierarchical attributes in the style of *Dungeons and Dragons*<sup>4</sup> or more

1. Theatre-style larps tend to focus more heavily on role-playing than on live combat, which is the primary focus of "boffer" larps. Theatre-style larps are intended to be run over a single session of set duration, which may vary from a couple of hours to multiple days.

2. Campaign larps are played over a series of sessions with narrative arcs that can span several weeks to several years. These larps are characterized by intense world-building and are often played with very large casts of characters that may come and go over time.

3. As noted above, boffer larps tend to focus primarily on simulated combat with the use of foam-padded weapons.

4. Michael J. Tresca. *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2010; Sarah Lynne Bowman. *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2010.

deliberately experimental or artistic larps designed specifically to explore gender.<sup>5</sup> Within this genre of theatre-style larp, we will first describe mainstream theatre-style larp design, exemplified in larps run at gaming conventions in the U.S. and the U.K., an approach in which the game designer and/or game master assigns gender and sexuality to players by means of pre-written characters. In contrast, we will then address the newer larp practice of gender-neutral casting, in which all characters are written as gender-neutral, leaving the assignment of gender and sexuality up to the player. Based on our observations as game participants, we will analyze two parlor larps from the larp convention Intercon (Chelmsford, MA; 2014, 2015) alongside the new popular larp, *College of Wizardry* (Poland, 2014). While neither game design can fully ensure that a more broad performance of gender and sexuality is enacted in the game, we assert that the gender-neutral design, by giving greater agency to players in choosing how gender is performed and what kinds of character relationships are formed, allows for more performances of possibility outside of merely reifying a gender binary and default heterosexuality.

### *Gender as Performance*

In the past fifty years, sociologists, psychologists, and cultural studies scholars have demonstrated that gender and sexuality are societal constructs and are not innate or biologically determined.<sup>6</sup> By this view, gender is portrayed through “language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign”<sup>7</sup> and gender identity is “compelled by social sanction and taboo.”<sup>8</sup> Gender becomes a matter of conviction, composed of a complex system of semiotic signs that produce a cohesive sense of a singular gender role. These signifiers—such as clothing

5. Some games explicitly explore these gender power structures and create gender-exclusive spaces to do so. For example, Eliot Wieslander’s larp *Mellan Himmel och Hav* was designed with the purpose of exploring non-binary genders and alternative relationship structures, and the Nordic larps *Mad About the Boy* and *It’s a Man’s World* have been run with an all self-identified female and all self-identified male cast, respectively. A deliberate exploration of gender as a larp’s focus is itself a challenge to normativity, and these games are an exception to the typical larps, particularly in the United States, that we refer to here as mainstream theatre-style larps.

6. Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2006; Erving Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, first edition. New York N.Y.: Anchor, 1959; Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna. *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach*, reprint edition. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1985; Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” *Gender & Society* 1.2 (1987), pp. 125–51, doi:10.1177/0891243287001002002.

7. Judith Butler. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988), p. 519.

8. Judith Butler. *Undoing Gender*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2009, p. 416.



*Promotional image for College of Wizardry. Photo by Christina Molbeck.*

style, pitch of voice, and physical gestures—are associated with gender-based assumptions about ability, sexuality, and behavior.<sup>9</sup> The notion that there are only two options for gender identity—male or female—is a result of gender performativity, which philosopher Judith Butler defines as the repetition, over time, of a particular performance, creating an expectation that the performance continues and a sense of fixedness of identity. Sociologist Chris Brickell notes that the gender performance of individuals is “subject to the surveillance of themselves and others” and people “may be held to account if gender is not done in an approved manner.”<sup>10</sup> And, as Butler has noted, this process of surveillance and approval can result in life-or-death consequences for those whose gender performances break the categories in some way, which is why representations of gender are worth critiquing.

The role-play in a larp mirrors this role-play of everyday life, as players deliver a gendered performance that is “compelling illusion, an object of *belief*<sup>11</sup> that is upheld during the game and affects the performance of others

9. Aaron Trammel. “Mysogyny and the Female Body in Dungeons and Dragons.” *Analog Game Studies* 1.3 (2014).

10. Chris Brickell. “Performativity or Performance? Clarifications in the Sociology of Gender.” *New Zealand Sociology* 18.2 (2003), p. 173.

11. *Butler 1988, p. 520.*

interacting with the player. Since the gender binary is the dominant norm in Western society, it tends to be replicated within the games created by members of that society. Larp participants tend to know where the boundaries, expectations, and tropes are for each gender since “rules and norms about what constitutes ‘competent’ gendering are established, enforced, and changed in particular contexts,”<sup>12</sup> such as in a larp. Indeed, a larp is often designed with the assumption that its players will know, understand, enact, and enforce these norms as a way to quickly create a shared fictional space within which to play. Thus, as a result of taking on a role in a larp, players may become more consciously aware of the performative nature of gender in everyday life.

Although cultural conceptions of gender performances and the believability of the material bodies that portray them are brought into a larp through its design, players in larps have the ability to make choices that can subvert these standards. According to game scholar Markus Montola, in a larp “the decisive power to define the decisions made by a free-willed character construct is given to the player of the character.”<sup>13</sup> The player may use this power to reject the forced choices of a gender binary, and to create instead a “third space of possibility within which all binaries become unstable.”<sup>14</sup> This space of possibility, however, enacted by an individual player, is only as good as the shared space of possibility that the players create together.

In order for the player choices to become integrated into gameplay, the other players must not only believe them, but accept them. Since players are operating under shared beliefs about a fictional world, there are specific expectations that players must conform to, lest their deviance spoil the consensus. These become a set of implicit rules that are used in addition to the explicit rules and mechanics introduced by design. Implicit rules are enforced by the social contract of the game, and the alibi of character, and they are often formed according to the out-of-game dominant cultural norms.<sup>15</sup> A player whose performance is considered deviant by the implicit or explicit game rules runs the risk of becoming a spoilsport. As historian Johan Huizinga notes in his seminal text, *Homo Ludens*, the figure of the spoilsport faces the risk of being ostracized from the community for “trespassing against” the social contract of the game.<sup>16</sup> Thus, non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality in a larp

12. Brickell, p. 173.

13. Markus Montola. “The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing: The Social Framework of Role-Playing Process.” *International Journal of Role-Playing* 1 (2009), p. 24.

14. Judith Halberstam. *Female Masculinity*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1998, p. 26.

15. Maury E. Brown and Benjamin A. Morrow. “Building Empathy and Empowering Others Through Live-Action Role Play.” May 2, 2015.

could be seen as spoiling the game. And, as in social situations outside the game, performances of gender and sexuality that deviate from expectations run the risk of serious consequences, both in- and out-of-game. Non-normative gender expressions and sexualities can create a break in the expectations of and faith in other players, and may therefore become a source of dispute or even aggression.

Larp designers and organizers have tended to deal with this potential for “gender trouble” in one of two ways: by pre-assigning character gender and sexuality based on casting questionnaires and player preference (which we refer to as mainstream theatre style larp design), or by allowing players to choose the genders of their characters and create the subsequent intimate relationships at their own comfort levels (what we call gender-neutral larp design).

### *Mainstream Theatre-Style Larp Design*

In mainstream theatre-style larp design, gender is assigned to a character by the game designer and/or game master (GM), who has certain performance and narrative objectives in mind. As a result, a gender role is then assigned to the player who is cast to portray that character. The casting decisions are traditionally based on the player’s answers on pre-larp casting questionnaires or on information provided by the player prior to the game, which usually includes player age and sex, along with the player’s contact information. In the absence of information from a casting questionnaire (or player-GM communication to the contrary), a cisgender, heterosexual, male/female binary gender identity for the player is usually taken for granted by the GM, and casting decisions are made according to that assumption. Typically, GMs choose players whose out-of-game gender expressions match the pre-assigned gender of the character.<sup>17</sup> The player then, through in-game costuming and performance, conforms their own embodied gender expression to the character’s.

One reason this casting practice remains so popular may be because of its function with regard to casting logistics for game conventions, where games have a certain number of slots available, and minimum gender quotas are used in order to ensure the game can run properly. Casting by gender is necessary due to narrative considerations, such as for a fixed relationship, or a plot reveal. In these instances, the game’s design is rarely flexible enough for

16. Johan Huizinga. *Homo Ludens*. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955, p. 11.

17. We recognize that sometimes players are cross-cast, with a male-identified player portraying a designated female character and vice versa. However, this depends on both a negotiation with the GM, and the player’s comfort level and preferences. A thorough discussion of cross-casting is outside the scope of this article.



a pre-gendered character to be revised by the player.<sup>18</sup> Thus, a binary gender system, and agreed-upon norms of the appropriate portrayal of a certain gender, become hard-coded into the game's imaginative space, and become a code that other players quickly decipher in order to determine how to interact with that character. These implicit rules tend to follow cisgender and heterosexual norms by default, as these are not only the dominant gender and sexual expressions out-of-game, but also may be presented as default portrayals in the game.

For example, in *Miss Maypole and the Christmas Pudding Affair* a Peaky Games larp which ran at Intercon O, Maury played Wisteria Asquith-Jones, who was pre-written as female, age 57 (though a timeless beauty),<sup>19</sup> married, and having a long-standing affair with the patriarch of a rival family. Ben played Teddy St. John-Smythe, a naive young male who used the Christmas party to pursue available women until his true family heritage was revealed. GMs assigned us to these roles based on our casting questionnaire information and their own preferences for the look and feel of each character, so that their prewritten characters were brought to life with believability and verisimilitude by appropriate player bodies and performances. Players were expected to encode the characters with plausible markers of the gender and sexuality that were written, so that other players could properly decode them and gauge their own interactions and immersion. Did Ben look and behave like a dashing young rake, for example? Did Maury embody the conservative British aristocratic woman keeping up appearances at a dinner party as things fell apart around her? Was it believable that her character was “a timeless beauty” who would be at the center of a love triangle and rivalry? An affirmative answer to these questions helps create immersion into the scenario and tends to positively affect other people's play.

Whereas the characters' sexual orientations were merely implicit in *Miss Maypole*, characters were assigned *both* a gender and a sexuality in *Bad Apples*, which ran at Intercon N and O. In this game, Maury played Nina Reddy-Murphy, who was a 32-year-old, bisexual woman. Gameplay required Nina to have relationships with her in-game husband (a secretly gay man), her in-game lover (a bisexual man) and any “other characters you find attractive,” regardless of their portrayed gender.<sup>20</sup> The character description indicated that Nina had

18. Although some games also have a certain number of characters that can be portrayed as either male or female without affecting the game's design, it is usually because those characters are not required to engage in romantic or sexual relationships.

19. Graham Arnold, Nickey Barnard, Dream Cloutman-Green, Jon Cloutman-Green, Clare Gardiner, and Sue Lee. “Wisteria Asquith-Jones Character Sheet.” *Miss Maypole and the Christmas Pudding Affair*. Peaky Games. February 27, 2015, Intercon O, Chelmsford, MA.

had several relationships with other women, was interested in a threesome with her husband and lover, and in exploring additional sexual relationships. The game was forthright in letting players know ahead of time that it would include such portrayals, and GMs made casting decisions based on player preferences as indicated on an extensive casting questionnaire. Player genders and sexualities did not necessarily correspond to character genders and sexualities, but for the performances to be believable players had to have a certain knowledge of and comfort with portraying non-normative genders and sexualities, as well as interacting with other characters expressing them. Players sought to embody those performances based on their own understandings of gender and sexuality, informed by out-of-game normativities and their own experiences, and then conformed to the pre-written role. Casting from player preferences indicated on the questionnaire helped to ensure that players were given a role within their comfort level as well as to help avoid problematic caricatures of gender and sexuality that could have arisen. However, since a larp is interactive and character relationships rely on both parties agreeing to participate, pre-written sexualities and queer relationships can flounder when there is a disparity among players' comfort levels and awareness. Players need to trust each other enough to risk portraying non-normative genders and/or sexualities as there may be in- and out-of-game consequences.

### *Gender-Neutral Larp Design*

However, it is possible to use a different game design that writes all characters without a predetermined and pre-assigned gender, leaving the choice of gender expression up to individual players. For example, *College of Wizardry*, a highly immersive European larp held at a Polish castle, uses the design principle of writing all 130+ characters as gender neutral.<sup>21</sup> This larp was first run in November 2014, and players portrayed college students, professors, and staff at a four-day event that simulated a hidden wizarding world inspired by *Harry Potter*.<sup>22</sup> Maury played in the inaugural run, and both Ben and Maury played

20. Tom Dimiduk, Alon Levy, and Thomas Wohlers. "Nina Reddy-Murphy Character Sheet." Bad Apples. February 2014, Intercon N, Chelmsford, MA.

21. A Grandiose Disaster, a U.S. larp by Michael K. Young, and Inside Hamlet, a Nordic larp created by Cecilia Dolk, Bjarke Pedersen, Martin Ericsson and Simon Svensson also have characters that are written as gender-neutral, with the player choosing what gender to portray.

22. The November 2014 and April 2015 runs of College of Wizardry were set in the Harry Potter universe, which Warner Brothers allowed provided future events did not include the Harry Potter intellectual property. College of Wizardry has been rewritten and runs beginning in November 2015 will be set in an original universe.

in the sequel in April 2015. In addition to being participant-observers, Ben and Maury are part of the design team for future *College of Wizardry* runs in Europe,<sup>23</sup> and we have written or revised many of the characters for gender neutrality, complexity, depth, and player agency. As we write and design a completely new wizarding universe based on North American magical lore and history, we are using an expanded gender-neutral design.

By “gender-neutral” we mean that the character is written without a pre-determined or assigned gender, and that all descriptions eschew gendered pronouns or idioms, metaphors, or other rhetorical devices that convey a particular gender expression. Writing characters as gender-neutral does not mean that gender is removed from the game, only from the character sheets themselves. Unlike in the examples discussed above, narratives in gender-neutral larp design are not dependent on any particular character being any fixed gender. Characters are written with a surname and a first initial, and descriptions are written in the second person to address the participant. After the character is cast, the player adds gender-specific elements as they flesh out the concept presented to them. Gender identity is their own choice, not a forced determination by an external authority figure. Some players may choose to explore gender expressions different from those they portray and are perceived as outside of the game, and some may choose non-binary identities.

After choosing their character’s gender expression and orientation, the *CoW* design then asks them to collaborate with other players (using online tools such as Facebook groups and online forums) to determine their character’s relationships and romantic attachments. Rather than face the stress of being cast in circumstances outside their comfort zone, players choose both the gender expression of the character and their relations at their own initiative and comfort level.

Letting players carry the weight of gendering their character alleviates a common logistical problem in mainstream theatre-style larp design, in which gendered characters are pre-written and then cast according to the available players’ gender preferences. Many organizers have found themselves in a scenario where their larp has enough player interest to be run, but the players themselves do not necessarily conform to the gendered characters as written. Such a circumstance often results in players playing outside their comfort zone, or hasty rewrites that might also challenge players’ comfort zones when character relationships now change to a different dynamic. Writing the

23. College of Wizardry will run November 12-15, 19-22, and 26-29, 2015 at Zamek Czochoa in Poland.



*Promotional image for College of Wizardry. Photo by Christina Molbeck.*

characters as gender-neutral, however, allows for any combination of participants, as any player added to the game can be cast as any of the remaining characters, regardless of their out-of-game gender identity, desire to play a particular gender, or function within the game.

However, escaping one's biases, politics, and out-of-game gender ideologies as a game designer is not easy,<sup>24</sup> and designing gender-neutral characters does not necessarily ensure queer identities are represented in the game. Larp, as a medium, allows for player choice that may subvert the game designer's intentions, especially if more than one player reinforces certain ideas or types of play. In other words, removing gender identity from the character design allows freedom of choice just as much as it allows players to universally adopt cisnormative and heteronormative roles and relationships by default. Powerful out-of-game normativities tend to bleed into game play, and although all gender identities and expressions may be allowed through a gender-neutral design, the result may nonetheless be a lack of queer identities and relationships altogether. Gender-neutral casting, then, can inadvertently result in the privileging of certain types of identities seen as more palatable

24. Benjamin A. Morrow. "The Struggle to Create Gender-Neutral Characters." *Inexorable Progress*, July 9, 2015.

or sanctioned by the cis-het dominant out-of-game hierarchies, especially if other portions of the game design—or the emergent play—tend to reinforce binary identities, assume heteronormativity, or privilege certain queer identities and sexualities over another. For example, bisexual women are often fetishized by cis-heterosexual males, as are lesbian relationships. These queer expressions may be somewhat more privileged and perhaps involve less risk of portrayal in a game. For the same reason, strict societal masculinity standards tend to disincentivize men from exploring varying gender expressions or portraying a non-heterosexual identity. As a result, women may feel more able than men to portray queer identities and relationships in games whose design and ethos ostensibly allow any player to choose any identity and sexual preference.



*Promotional image for College of Wizardry. Photo by Christina Molbeck.*

These complications occurred in *College of Wizardry* in November 2014 and April 2015, where—although a few players chose to express multiple forms of gender, including gender-fluid and agender—the majority of players chose a binary male or female identity. Furthermore, players of non-binary gendered characters ran up against the problem of the in-game titles of “witch” for assumed female characters and “wizard” for assumed male characters. Some players worked around such gendered appellations by creating the portmanteau “witchard.” Gender and sexuality of a character became an integral part of the game as a result of the game’s concluding event: a traditional ball for which

every student had to obtain a date. This plot element required that a player's gender and sexuality become a topic of conversation and an opportunity for misrepresentation and misunderstanding of a certain encoded performance. As in society outside the game, bisexuality was mainly erased as characters were assumed to be either heterosexual or homosexual by default. The gender-fluid characters who used plural pronouns were a source of confusion as other players attempted to reconcile these non-normative performances with the traditional norms of male-female heterosexual dates for a dance. Sometimes another character's actions or dialogue reinforced a heteronormative default, such as when asking whether a particular character had obtained a date for the ball using the assumption of a dominant gender identity or sexual preference. While these could be corrected by the character who was misgendered or whose sexual orientation was wrongly assumed, the presence of such default assumptions exposes how resilient these categories can be.

### *Conclusion*

While games can be written that open spaces to question the performative nature of gender and sexuality or to challenge a reliance on gender binary categories to determine player roles and character relationships, the design itself does not ensure that non-binary expressions of gender and/or non-heterosexual relationships will emerge in the game. Strong cultural influences from out-of-game, as well as an insider gamer culture that tends to reinforce a binary classification system and assumptions of default heterosexuality, create implicit rules of play that may limit what players find to be believable or possible in a given game, regardless of whether it is a mainstream theatre-style larp or a gender-neutral larp. Players bring to any game their own expectations of what it means to be male or female. These expectations are derived from out-of-game norms as well as from in-game conventions, representations, and traditions, themselves based on normative gender performances over time. Players, as characters, react to other characters based on a shared understanding of these gendered performances, operating from within an insider semiotic system that comprises both out-of-game and in-game elements in order to make meaning. Since players have to share a co-created world in a larp, agreed-upon visual and verbal cues—including gender and sexuality—that determine interaction with another character are an important part of play.

The presence of a physical body in a larp—as opposed to a representation of gender through artwork on a card, as a miniature or token in a tabletop game, or a customized avatar in a video game—brings a level of physicality that can constrain believable gender expression and affect the choices other

players make, thus affecting the game's narrative and outcome. Actual bodies in play also introduce other physical elements such as sensory experiences, pheromones, proximity, and potentially touch that affect game play, invoke out-of-game relational or sexual interactions,<sup>25</sup> and also make gender more clearly performative than representational. When an actual player body is incongruous with the character concept—either as a result of the player's presented gender or deviance from dominant ideas of gendered attributes such as beauty or strength—the believability of the character performance is affected.

Since player expectations can reinforce gender and sexual normativity as the default, a game design that does not counter these norms can create a situation where players that fall outside default normativities, by gender, by sexual orientation, by appearance, by body type, or by other factors, are at risk of having a marginalized game experience. While writing characters that allow the players to make decisions regarding character gender does create more player agency than having character gender and/or sexuality pre-assigned, the constraints on gender expression do not always emerge from game design but through the normativities that designers and players bring from their culture to the game. As a result, game design itself cannot alleviate the gender trouble we can experience in larp, but better game design can mitigate some of the stress and discomfort and help create the space and opportunities for inclusion of expressions of gender and sexuality that exist outside the default normativities.

25. Maury E. Brown. "Pulling the Trigger on Player Agency: How Psychological Intrusions in Larp's Affect Game Play." In *Wyrd Con Companion Book 2014*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman. Wyrd Con Creative Commons License, 2014, pp. 96–111.

# A Look Back from the Future: Play and Performance in Biosphere 2013

Moyra Turkington

For two years in the early 1990s, I did larp onstage for a paying audience. None of us called it larp then, but in retrospect I have come to recognize the similarities of what I do now and what I did then. We called them “soaps,” and considered them live improv serial dramedies. *Biosphere 2013* was neither the first, nor the last, soap to be featured at the Union Theatre, a small, black box, poverty theatre<sup>1</sup> that lived a brief but vibrant life in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada in the late 80s and early 90s.

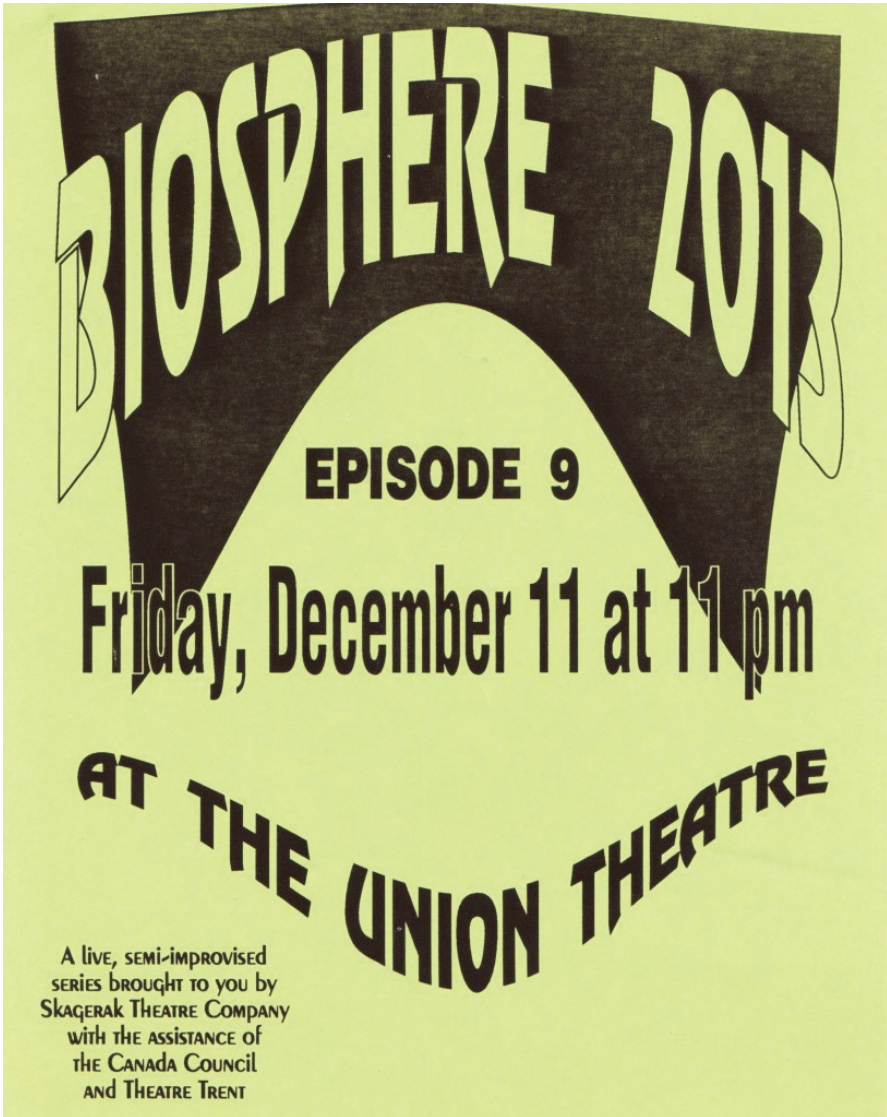
In this article, I present an autoethnographic look into the production and address how it relates to analog games, particularly to live action role-play. I will describe the system of the production—including preparatory work, rehearsal play, scene lists, and performance improv—and have a look at similar techniques used in some genres of living games, specifically Nordic larp, black box, and jeepform. I argue that the presence of an audience creates a radical reorientation in contrast to the larp environment, and explore how play changes when goals shift from the experiential to the outwardly performative.

## *Biosphere 2013*

Prior to initiating the production, the Director and the Creative Director (Frederik Graver and Kate Story), created a contextualization brief for the show. Set in a dystopian near-future of ecological collapse and corporate control, *Biosphere 2013* aimed to explore ideas of autonomy, obedience, mind control, surveillance, and scarcity in an increasingly technological world. The context brief was a twenty-page document that spoke to the transition of society from 1990–2013 and described the formulation of the corporatocratic North American Intelligence Network (NAIN) government, and the development of climate controlled and regulated experimental biospheres that

1. Poverty theatre is a term used to describe a not-for-profit, collectively run theatre in which the totality of work performed for the running and maintenance of the space, or its productions, are performed by volunteers and in which productions are generally low-budget and minimalist. The term may have come from a reference to Jerzy Grotowski’s “Poor Theatre” which is used to describe the productions themselves.





*Original poster for Biosphere 2013. Image provided by the author.*

were meant to protect NAIN citizens from the toxicity of the declining environment. The document also described a resistance network of revolutionaries, neo-luddites and saboteurs that opposed the corporation. This document served as the first source of creation for the show; in role-playing terms, it was the setting and situation text.

The casting for the show was similar to many improv-specific theatre productions. A call for auditions was posted, responding actors were assessed through group improv exercises to determine their suitability, and callbacks were interviewed. However, despite the fact that the play had been “cast,” no specific roles had been developed for the production at the time of casting. Instead, characters for the show were developed through a long series of workshops and rehearsals that ran over the course of two months. A wide variety of personas were collaboratively invented by the cast through casual, non-canonical improv play<sup>2</sup> within the setting and situation as established by the directors. Characters that did not work or create dynamic tension were discarded, and over the course of rehearsals key figures emerged that formed a cast of character prototypes.

Once the base cast was set, characters were firmed up in development rehearsals. Intensive hotseat interviews<sup>3</sup> provided background, depth and interrelatedness to the characters, meditation exercises<sup>4</sup> allowed the actors to turn inwards to understand their characters better, Laban movement workshops<sup>5</sup> helped the actors construct and adopt character physicality, and voice workshops<sup>6</sup> helped them find character voice. Finally, directed improv work with the directorial team put them in situations to test the tightness of interaction with each other and with the setting. Following this, the directors went back to the contextualization brief to include elements that had emerged through the rehearsals, and to eliminate elements that were not working, and set down the foundation of the show.

With the cast, roles, setting and situation set, the production was ready to launch. The show was produced in ten weekly installments, or episodes, on Friday nights after the theatre’s main scheduled production had let out. True to

2. This refers to improv play that does not become part of the official framework of the fiction, setting, or production until it is officially accepted into the canon by the directors.

3. Hotseat interviews are a workshop technique in which actors assume their character and subject themselves to rapid-fire questions from workshop participants in order to establish details about the character’s background and personality.

4. Character meditation: a workshop technique in which a workshop facilitator leads actors through a guided meditation in order to develop character internality and depth of feeling in relation to a fictional proposition, such as a hypothetical situation, or a setting element.

5. Rudolf Laban pioneered the analysis and documentation of human movement. Laban Movement Analysis has been used extensively in theatre environments to determine and develop a movement “fingerprint” for a character: a unique way in which the character, like a person, habitually moves.

6. There are many different types of voice workshops. In this production, workshops focused on warming and projecting the voice, and determining speech patterns and affectations specific to the character.

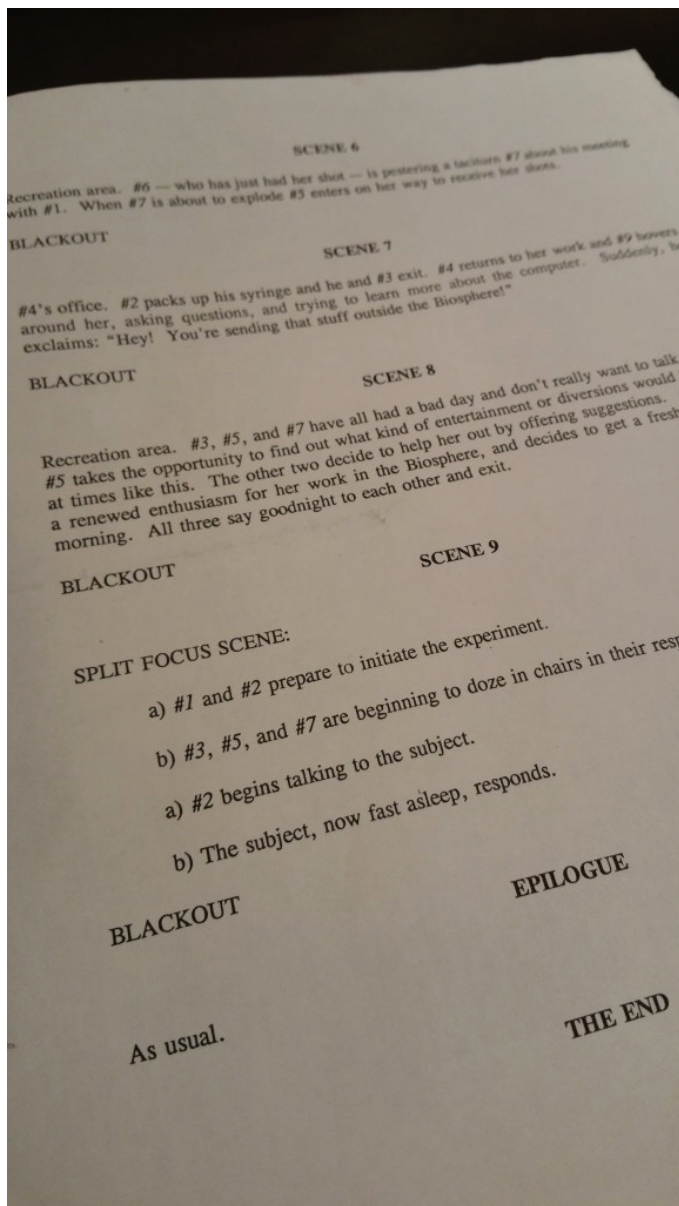
the form of a black box production, the show used minimalist lighting, props and costumes, experimental staging, and adapted to the set design of whatever show was being featured at the main production hour.

These soaps were neither devised theatre (a collaborative process that results in fixed performance piece) nor improv theater (fully spontaneous performances), but represented a hybrid model between the two. The dialogue, blocking and presentation was always improvised, but the structure of each episode's narrative arc was devised by a directorial team and based on exploratory scenes that had been improvised during a rehearsal several days in advance. Each episode of the serial followed a cycle of production: on Wednesday evening before the Friday show, the cast would gather in a rehearsal space, and play out potential scenes for the upcoming episode. Cast members would have the opportunity to call scenes that would showcase their characters and introduce interesting plot points that they thought would bring good narrative value to the show. Directors could also call for scenes, or request a scene be rerun in several ways to understand its potential. The directorial team would then meet and construct a scene list for the performance itself.

On Friday night, an hour and a half before doors opened to the audience, the cast would gather in the performance space and the director would post the scene list up on a wall. The cast would gather around eagerly to find out what scenes they were in, and where the narrative direction of the show was going. The scene list would contain a structure for the episode consisting of eight to twelve scenes in which groupings of characters would meet in a named place and pursue a described objective. In the first few episodes, these scenes were written with detail, but by about Episode 3, when the process had matured, the scenes were brief, simple, and direct, and afforded the actors a greater range of improvisational liberty. Many scenes were variations of the scenes discovered in rehearsals, but each episode also contained new scenes and new ideas.

The ensuing hour would be a flurry of rapid engagement between the actors, who would pair up with scene partners to quickly discuss staging and blocking and agree on the mood and dramatic tension of a scene. The cast would explore the set design that the main production had introduced, and call out quick lighting cues to the technician. Finally, we donned costumes and makeup and squeezed in a quick vocal warm-up just as the doors of the theatre were opening. During the performance itself, the cast would self-direct, making entrances and exits according to the scene list, pre-show negotiations, and improv instincts, while managing timing and dialogue on the fly.

Because the format for this production was a legacy of a number of



One of the many scene lists for Biosphere 2013. Image provided by the author.

other successful improv soaps—*The Coffin Factory* (historical fiction), *East Side Stories* (soap opera), *Hurricane Ridge* (surreal mystery), *One Red Shoe* (Noir

detective)—the show had a bit of a cult following that came back loyally week after week. The audience was engaged, high spirited, and unruly, equipped with the knowledge that their response in the moment and over time could shape or shift the direction of the scene or the show in general. They were vocal and sometimes outright rowdy throughout the performance, cheering, booing, heckling or cajoling the actors in order to spur a response to their demands.

### *Commonalities*

There are obvious parallels between this production and larp in that the actors, as players, participated in the production through the locus of characters and drove action through them to create a narrative arc in a fictionalized world. They made decisions and built creative content based on a model of who their characters were, and how they would respond to the situation as contextualized. Not unlike a game master or larp facilitator, the directorial team acted as architects and gatekeepers to the production: they contextualized the situation, guided and organized play, acted as arbiters to the fiction, and essentially determined what was possible within the world of the show. And of course, actors physically adopted their character's behavior, improvised dialogue and used costumes and props to enhance verisimilitude, as do many larps.

The production took place in the traditional context of a black box theatre and therefore it is unsurprising that it bears some strong similarities to larp and freeform practice in the Nordic arthaus tradition—particularly to jeepform and black box scenarios that have been built on and informed by the traditions of experimental theatre. Techniques used during *Biosphere 2013*'s setup, rehearsals and production can also be seen in many Nordic arthaus larps. For example, character engagement meditations are used in *Mad About the Boy* (first run Norway, 2010), flashbacks in *When Our Destinies Meet* (first run Sweden, 2009), hotseat interviews in *Pan* (first run Denmark, 2013), and monologues in *Doubt* (first run Denmark, 2007). In addition, *Play With Intent* (2012) neatly illustrates how many of the techniques used in *Biosphere 2013* are part of the common toolkit of structured freeform games.

### *Differences*

First and foremost, the most crucial and obvious difference between *Biosphere 2013* and larp is that it was performed for a consumer audience. This addition demands a paradigmatic shift in goal orientation for players/facilitators, which in turn fundamentally changes the production dynamic from play-as-participation to play-as-performance.

In analog game contexts, we rarely play with the intent of having an audience. The act of role-playing is centered on individual and communal fulfillment; that is, an individual plays because they like the experience of playing. Individuals play together to enable that experience, and because often the act of playing together is a critical component to enjoyment. In individual play communities or game designs, the theatrical quality of the game may also be an important component to enjoyment. These communities may include a notion of fellow-players-as-audience to enhance performance quality or social attentiveness. However, this concept differs critically from a theatre audience in terms of externality: even when we act as each other's audience, we are still collaborating solely in the service of our own communal fulfillment. In a role-playing model, the goals of play serve the experiential satisfaction of the players themselves, individually or collectively. In the presence of an audience, the goal of play is to serve the experiential satisfaction of that *external audience* first and foremost.

This shift in goal orientation radically changes the entire network of engagement. Without an audience, the primary role of the facilitator is to help produce the play *experience*: they serve as a procedural guide through the game structure, a gatekeeper to the fiction, and a manager of the group dynamic. When serving an audience—particularly for a serial, such as *Biosphere 2013*—the director's primary job is to curate the *product* of play: to monitor the satisfaction level of the audience, calibrate the narrative arc according to the audience's enjoyment, and drive the players/actors to bring the best performance possible.

This change of directorial role in turn demands a shift in player/actor expectation. If a player's experience is at the heart of the activity, then personal needs are prioritized: players have a reasonable expectation that their participation will be equitable, that their ideas will be incorporated, and that they get to decide what is good enough in terms of story, performance and play. But when an audience is at the heart of the activity, then players do not have the same expectations: they will be featured only inasmuch as their ideas or performance quality suit the production as assessed first by the directors and ultimately by the audience.

This creates a sharp delineation between play-as-experience and play-as-product. First, the concepts of player agency and narrative incorporation become fully independent from each other when play is in the service of product. For instance, in rehearsal play for *Biosphere 2013*, participants could take any action that fit the conceptualization brief, but nothing counted until it became incorporated into the scene list by the directorial team, and thus was scheduled to meet the audience. In essence, the players/actors held near-total

agency for creating content, but zero agency for incorporating it, and had no mechanism by which to push their personal agendas, aside from anticipating and feeding the production's goals in as high-skilled a way as possible.

Furthermore, the definition of "high-skilled" is much expanded in a play-as-product context. Role-playing generally requires robust imaginative thinking, rapid idea generation, theory of mind management, and social mediation skills. Larp further extends the skill demand to physical acting and emotional embodiment. However, larping for an external audience demands all of those skills ratchet to a new level because the audience has become the arbiter of quality, and therefore play must be proved to be "worth it" before it is integrated into the production. Furthermore, the social dynamic compounds: players no longer have to just forecast how their character thinks and how their fellow players (and respective characters) think, but also what the directors will think that the audience will want as well as how the audience will actually receive the performance. It no longer suffices for us to just understand and feel our characters and stories; we now have to also *project them* to the audience in a way that will enable them to form emotional connections with the production. Every participant must always be viewing their performance with an objective, assessing eye and steering their character actions and physical performance towards the audience's satisfaction. To earn the ability to be featured in the *Biosphere 2013* in significant ways was to master performance skills and the observer/performer calibration process.

It is also important to note that the soap audience's active role created an enhanced demand for rapid incorporation of live feedback into fictional actualization without breaking the constraints of the episode's frame and intention. When the audience did not like how a scene was progressing they would heckle, and when they wanted to see more they would cheer or shout out encouragement. Under a pressure framework of attention and timing to the production's quality, the players/actors had to incorporate suggestions to serve the audience's needs.

### *Conclusions*

So how can knowing about a twenty-plus year-old black box theatre soap inform what we are doing today? First and foremost, it teaches us something about the relationship between goals and structures in games and how opportunities for design and experience are created. Looking at *Biosphere 2013* through the lens of larp cleanly illustrates how changes in goal orientation demand different frameworks and dynamics for play. In the delineation between play-as-participation and play-as-product, devised and

improvisational theatre hybridized to find a niche genre and create new opportunities for performance. This kind of cross-comparison of larp-on-the-borders with neighboring fields could create the same innovation for analog games.

Looking at larp through the lens of *Biosphere 2013* demands that we question the strong demarcation often drawn between theatre and analog games. It asks us to look at what we take from theatre (e.g. techniques), to ask what we have left behind (e.g. the audience), and to examine validity and use value of some of the things we take for granted as basic rights of play (e.g. player agency). Shifting paradigms, even subtly, demands new structures and patterns of social engagement, creates opportunities to see how we might approach our games differently, and encourages us to explore how different the output of our play might be as a result.

Expanding the territory of the game field into the externally performative provides new opportunities for design innovation and skill development. New ways of being with our characters and the fiction open different loci of enjoyment for players to engage with. Just as larp itself provides a new platform of exploration for players with a desire to physically engage with characters and fictions, performative larping would, for some players, extend that opportunity further, or in new directions. Players who have a strong desire to develop performance techniques may find the demands of a performative larp helpful in achieving those goals, and players who find fulfillment in character enactment and performance may find new vistas of satisfaction in play when in front of an audience.

Finally, it is worth noting that designers on both sides of the equation are playing on these boundaries already. The experiential theatre world seems to be entering a new renaissance where improv, performance, and audience interaction are creating such innovative productions as *Sleep No More* and *Then She Fell*. In larp, Nick Smith and Jake Richmond and Jackson Tegu's *Sea Dracula* (2008) is played with the help of an audience who deliberates on conflicts as expressed through physical dance-offs. Furthermore, two of Jason Morningstar's larps in development venture strongly into a play-as-performance model. *Ghost Court* (2015) is a high-spirited courtroom comedy about ghosts and people pursuing small claims cases against each other and includes a gallery-audience of observers (who may or may not become players), and a dynamic of brief interactions that encourage players to ham scenes up for an increasingly rowdy audience. *The Dream* (2015) finds a fascinating niche between larp and silent movies, pushing the ephemeral nature of play-as-



participation into the endurance of play-as-product when the game produces a literal short silent movie that can be shared as a persistent artifact of play.

# Manipulating Environments in American Freeform

Jason Cox

Larps—American freeform games among them—have the potential to create sensory experiences surpassing the limits of language. Perhaps because larps have so long been associated with theatrical works,<sup>1</sup> we often refer to them in the language of theater, and so too focus on strictly their linguistic properties.<sup>2</sup> Larps have loose pre-written “scripts” that guide the improvisation of an experience. Depending on the style of the larp, play might already be structured around a plot or narrative, prioritizing specific authorial voices. Sometimes larps co-opt the language of film and video by considering how a scene is “framed” or where the “audience” can be presumed to be.

But although the language of theater may feel natural to larp, to speak of it solely in these terms underestimates the importance of non-linguistic engagement. As arts-based education researcher Elliot Eisner tells us, “*meaning is not limited to what words can express.*”<sup>3</sup> Works that explore what it is to be other than we are will indeed incorporate stimuli beyond words, and we must take these somatic stimuli seriously. To do so requires redirecting scholarly attention to the environments in which games happen, keeping in mind arts-research Graeme Sullivan’s dictum that “as contexts change, meanings change,”<sup>4</sup> and to consider how a change in those environments changes the experience of play.

## *Framing and Freeform*

My own perspective on larp as a professor of art education and the particular types of larp I employ—American freeform games—heavily inform my analysis. I

1. See, for example, Sarah Lynne Bowman. "Connecting Role-Playing, Stage Acting, and Improvisation." *Analog Game Studies* 2.6 (2015); Marjukka Lampo. "Ecological Approach to the Performance of Larping." *International Journal of Role-Playing* 5 (2015); Emma Leigh Waldron. "Larp-as-Performance-as-Research." *Analog Game Studies* 1.1 (2014).

2. Angelina Ilieva. "Cultural Languages of Role-Playing." *International Journal of Role-Playing* 4 (2014), pp. 26-38.

3. Elliot Eisner. *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002, p. 230. Italics in the original.

4. Graeme Sullivan. *Art Practice As Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts* 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE, 2010, p. 32.

use larps as instruments for collaborative arts-based inquiry regarding ideas, situations, and emotions that are difficult to access through traditional means of research. The artistic encounters experienced by communities of play<sup>5</sup> present opportunities for members of these communities to have experiences normally inaccessible to them in their lives, thereby allowing for the participants to understand what it is like to be other than they are.<sup>6</sup> The collaborative nature of these experiences generate inter-subjective space of “shared symbolically-mediated meanings”<sup>7</sup> that enable the community of play to create and recreate identities on both individual and communal levels. My dissertation on arts-based inquiry and American freeform<sup>8</sup> applied these ideas by investigating communities’ enactment of scenes from the point of view of students, parents, teachers, and administrators in an imagined educational community.

Larpwright and journalist Lizzie Stark describes American freeform as “a style of rules-light, story-oriented, one-shot, live or semi-live (freeform) roleplaying scenario design.”<sup>9</sup> It is light on props and costumes, and is known for the incorporation of “meta-techniques.” Meta-techniques are mechanics that interrupt the narrative, heighten the drama, inject uncertainty, and/or provide the players with insight that remains hidden from their characters, essentially disrupting illusory experiences in favor of investigating cognitive spaces.<sup>10</sup>

What does or does not “count” as American freeform is (somewhat intentionally) vaguely defined, a factor that suits it as a medium for collaborative research as it encourages diverse experiences for the communities of play. Participants have the ability to incorporate what is already familiar to them, allowing them to already enter the larp with a degree of expertise, thus making the games accessible to players with different levels of experience.

5. See Celia Pearce. *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009.

6. Elliot Eisner. "Art and knowledge." *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*. J. Gary Knowles & Ardra L. Cole, eds. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2008, pp. 3-12.

7. Michael Parsons. "Art and Culture, Visual and Verbal Learning: Where are the Bridges?" *Australian Art Education* 8.1 (July 1994): pp. 7-14, here p. 12.

8. Jason Cox. *Educational communities, arts-based inquiry, & roleplaying: An American freeform exploration with professional and pre-service Art educators*. Dissertation. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University, 2015.

9. Lizzie Stark. *Pocket Guide to American Freeform*. eBook. 2014, p. 10.

10. Stark.

*Immersion, Identity, and Environment in American Freeform*

Because I am speaking of the environmental impact of the space on a game, the nature of immersion in an American freeform game must be addressed. William J. White, J. Tuomas Harviainen, and Emily Care Boss note that the precise meaning of what is meant by “immersion” greatly depends on the culture of role-playing from which a speaker originates.<sup>11</sup> They contrast indie tabletop RPGs’ focus on encouraging particular shared experiences with the individual psychological experiences encouraged by the Nordic games movement *jeepform*. The mimetic and meta-level nature of American freeform, in which constant and ongoing negotiation of what linguist and games scholar James Gee identifies as the perspectives of the players, their characters, and a hybrid player-character transpires,<sup>12</sup> uses the tension between such perspectives to move back and forth between shared and individual experiences. This fluidity provides the tools to enact what Gee describes as a “good role-playing game,” as it creates a space to “think new thoughts about what I value and what I don’t.”<sup>13</sup> By choosing and inhabiting the role he/she creates through action and game-play, a player’s connection between context and interpretation is pushed into the foreground. Somewhere in the amalgamation of assumed and extra-diegetic identities involved in the game, players construct an ever-changing “core identity”, representing player beliefs.

According to Marinka Copier, the negotiation of roles and boundaries is integral to games and game play.<sup>14</sup> She highlights how the trope of the ‘magic circle’ as a boundary between real life and play is actually far more permeable than it initially appears to be. Because the theoretical membrane between those realities is transparently and repeatedly pierced in American freeform, there is a tension in that negotiation, a state of play that encourages players to actively interpret and re-interpret the experience.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, the goals of most American freeform players do not fit the divisions Mike Pohjola outlines in the

11. William J. White, J. Tuomas Harviainen, and Emily Care Boss. "Role-Playing Communities, Cultures of Play and the Discourse of Immersion." *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*. eds. Evan Torner and William J. White. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012, pp. 71-86.

12. James Paul Gee. *Why Video Games Are Good for Your Soul: Pleasure and Learning*. Melbourne, Australia: Common Ground Publishing, 2005. It is worth noting that Gee focuses most of his research on video games, though the concepts he speaks to with regards to RPGs are also applicable to tabletop games and larp.

13. Gee, p. 115.

14. Marinka Copier. "Challenging the magic circle: How online role-playing games are negotiated by everyday life." *Digital Material: Tracing New Media in Everyday Life and Technology*. Eds. Marianne Van Den Boomen, Sybille Lammes, Ann-Sophie Lehmann, Joost Raessens, and Mirko Tobias Schafer. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009, pp. 159-172.

Manifesto of the Turku school.<sup>16</sup> They are not specifically focused on trying to “win” the game (*gamist*), to act out a story (*dramatist*), to simulate a working society (*simulationist*), or to completely inhabit their characters (*eläytyjisti*), but rather to participate in the game in order to have the experience of the game itself. The impact of the game is simultaneously an experience that can be shared with other players while simultaneously being intensely personal and emotional. This duality encourages what arts educator Maxine Greene refers to as “communitas,”<sup>17</sup> a unifying shared experience that still preserves individual interpretations and differences.

Social environments constructed in American freeform games are enmeshed with the physical environments in which the game occurs. A game’s environment incorporates the design ideas of the creators to emphasize particular actions or ideas and, in doing so, shapes a theoretical space in which the play will occur.<sup>18</sup> To realize this space, the players of the community of play contend with what Evan Torner identifies as practical and logistical considerations, such as the money, time, and travel limitations of the players.<sup>19</sup>

However, each community of play also has their own specific affordances, such as the knowledge base of the players, the versatility of the environment in which they play, and the community’s capacity for manipulating that environment. The resultant gameplay occurs at the intersection of the players, the game, the environment and the social context. Because American freeform uses relatively few props and typically can be completed in a single session, its physical environments tend not to focus on mimetic reality but instead on crafting an *emotional environment* that reinforces particular themes.

15. James S. Hans. *The Play of the World*. Amherst, Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1981.

16. Mike Pohjola. *The Manifesto of the Turku School*. 2003.

17. Maxine Greene. *Variations on a Blue Guitar: The Lincoln Center Institute Lectures on Aesthetic Education*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2001. Greene adapted this term from Paul and Percival Goodman’s conception of a society that employed shared experience for palliative means. See Paul Goodman and Percival Goodman. *Communitas*. New York, NY: Random House, 1966.

18. Henry Jenkins. "Game Design as Narrative Architecture." *First person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. Eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2004, pp. 118–130.

19. Evan Torner. "Air Castles Built on Concrete." *The Official Book of Knutepunkt 2013: Crossing Physical Borders*. Eds. Karete Jacobsen Meland and Katrine Øverlie Svela. Oslo: Fantasiforbundet, 2013, pp. 9–20.

*Illustrations of Environment in American Freeform*

Keeping the above in mind, the construction of environment in American freeform games can be understood along the lines of Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's schema for meaningful game design: an intersection of rules (the organization of a system as designed by its creator), play (the manner in which players experience and modify a system), and culture (the social and physical contexts engaged with and inhabited by the game).<sup>20</sup> These intersections produce the individual and collective narratives of the community. According to Henry Jenkins, environment fosters immersion in such narratives "in at least one of four ways: spatial stories can evoke pre-existing narrative associations; they can provide a staging ground where narrative events are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their *mise en scène*; or they provide resources for emergent narratives."<sup>21</sup> Three different games illustrate this principle: Jason Morningstar's *The Climb*,<sup>22</sup> Rafael Chandler's *ViewScream*,<sup>23</sup> and Lizzie Stark's *In Residency*.<sup>24</sup> These examples are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather reveal the impact of and possibilities for sensory environments in American freeform games.

*The Climb*

*The Climb* is designed as a GM-less scenario in which a group of four to six mountaineers (the players) are making an illegal first ascent up a mountain. This expedition could theoretically result in a high degree of fame and prestige for the climbers, but includes catastrophically dangerous risks. Aside from those dangers, the characters have conflicts with one another that make trust scarce. The overarching feeling is of isolation and loneliness, a feeling reinforced by the premise, characters, and environmental factors that Morningstar has put in place.

In *The Climb*, movements and locations of the players are limited in the first half of the game to three small areas that represent the "tents" of the base camp while the sounds of a blizzard are played from an mp3 file. Although the game can be played without the soundtrack, its inclusion is highly effective for establishing a context and for the pacing the game.<sup>25</sup> The constant wind

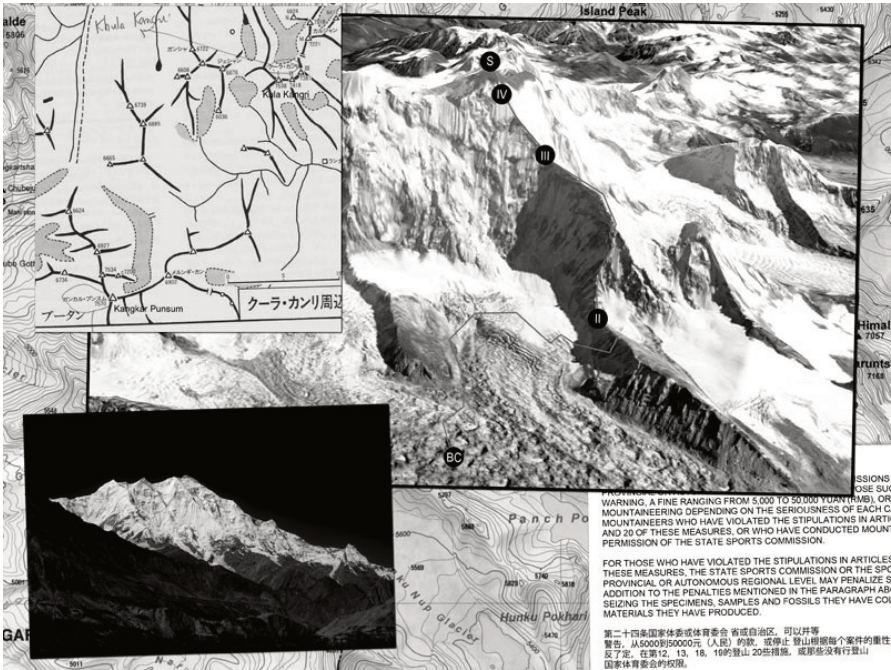
20. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman. Rules of play: Game Design Fundamentals. Cambridge, MA & London, England: The MIT Press, 2004.

21. Jenkins, p. 123.

22. Jason Morningstar. *The Climb*. Durham, NC: Bully Pulpit Games LLC, 2013.

23. Rafael Chandler. *ViewScream*. Neoplastic Press, 2013.

24. Lizzie Stark. *In Residency*. Boston, MA: Stark Scenarios, 2014.



A page from the game materials for *The Climb*. Used with permission from Bully Pulpit Games.

and experience of either being cramped or abandoned in the small spaces enhance the tense atmosphere and feelings of isolation, creating bleed through artificial movement restrictions and suggestions of inclement weather. The sound of the blizzard breaks at the thirty and forty minute marks, when there are weather reports in Chinese. Diegetically, this alerts the characters—particularly Sweet, as the meteorologist—that if they are going to send a group up the mountain, they must do so soon. The soundtrack mechanically controls the pacing of the game and adds a certain discordant “out of place” feeling to the piece.

At the forty-five minute mark, there is one minute of silence, during which players split into two groups: three players go to a new space (ideally out of range of sight and hearing) to construct what is essentially a “radio play” of what happens on the summit, which is communicated by walkie-talkie or by cell phone. Meanwhile, the other players remain as support at the base camp and

25. It also heightens the importance of the character Sweet as both a meteorologist and a rookie climber.

react to the story the ascent team creates. The soundtrack and game itself end after ninety minutes, followed by a debriefing session.



*The author playing as Lund in The Climb. Photo used with permission by the author.*

I have run *The Climb* for several communities, but the run I consider the most successful was set at a gaming convention, a context which fit the tight structure and pacing (although it also technically “broke the rules” by including one too many players.) The affordances of the convention center meant that we had access to two secluded, relatively comfortable rooms, wherein the lights were controlled via dimmer switch. Because of some late arrivals, I removed myself from gameplay and instead focused on facilitating. These variables greatly affected the game. In addition to the regular play materials, I had prepared lanyards that displayed each character’s name, provided small flashlights for



each player, and used masking tape to denote the “tent” areas that each had an opening (a break in the tape) that faced inward toward the other “tents.”

The introductory narrative describes how the raging snowstorm alternates between extremely bright and dark conditions, and during play I adjusted the lights to reflect or suggest moods to the players. I also removed my shoes, allowing me to walk very quietly on the carpeted floors and blend into the background while listening into the conversations. I would change the environmental variables to suit emergent play. Because I was not playing a character I was on hand to provide direction to the “ascent team” in the second act, and to use their decisions to anticipate what environment would be most effective for the “base camp” players.

The most poignant moment for me was when Sweet had to be left alone at the base camp for her health while a rescue party was sent up for what was left of the summit team. I left her alone in the room as well, sitting in her “tent” under a spotlight. Later, the player told me she prized that existential loneliness even as it also bled into her own struggles with depression.

### *ViewScream*

Rafael Chandler does not call his game *ViewScream* an American freeform game, instead referring to it either as a “live-action game designed for play using video-chat software like Skype or Google Hangouts” or as a “varp” (video-augmented role-playing game). Nevertheless, it shares some of American freeform’s essential characteristics and an innovative environmental mechanic. It is also a GM-less game, with the expectation being that players leap into their roles as soon as the chat begins and never break out of character until play ends. It presents several adventures that follow the same general premise: a damaged spaceship and its four remaining officers (Medical, Bridge, Weapons, and Engineering) face imminent destruction, a fate they must confront together even while they are only able to communicate via the ship’s viewscreens. Playing *ViewScream* requires that players have a clear set of expectations, both because familiarity with the setting and rules helps keep players from breaking character, and because the system and the theme conspire to create an ending wherein at least one character will die horribly. The basic gameplay is that each character has three problems which only one of the other characters can solve, improvised over the course of several scenes.

The text of the game breathlessly asks:

“Will you turn on your shipmates? Will you work with them, even though some of them may be guilty of horrific crimes? What happened to the rest of

the crew? How many minutes do you have before it happens to you, too? Can you escape, or will someone find your mangled corpse floating in the void?”<sup>26</sup>

*ViewScream* essentially transforms attributes that would break immersion in a larp—the personal distance and lack of physical interaction of online chats—and co-opts them for a tangible representation of the characters’ diegetic experiences. The stories the game presents concern the panicked, fearful, and angry responses of the characters to the dire situation they face, and the enforced helplessness of literally being cut off from one another reinforces that fact. While the scarcity of resources determines play in the mechanics, it is the presence or absence of sensory data that matters for the lived experience of the players. However, the diegesis is necessarily founded on trust between the players, who describe the ship and its hazards with evocative language rich in sensory detail. Players are encouraged to fill dead air as much as possible to keep play from going stagnant and to maintain the tense atmosphere through a constant barrage of words. Even when they are not speaking, the players are asked to contribute and signal their emotional state through their body language. At the end of the game, each character has a few final words as they either escape the ship or realize that their demise is imminent, after which they switch off their camera and deprive the remaining characters of even that tenuous connection.

Chandler offers some suggestions for players to further tailor their experience by further manipulating their environment,<sup>27</sup> offering suggestions such as using specialized lights, wearing costumes, or creating a backdrop. This is interesting because it is a collaborative effort, with each player altering their own space rather than a single player orchestrating everything, and because those alterations are largely done for the benefit of the other players rather than for the person actually creating them. Chandler further suggests that mobile technology could allow one or more players to move the play outside of a single room and to act as a member of an “away team,” or that additional players could be recruited to represent the threats a more mobile player might face. This incorporation of techniques and ideas prevalent in ARG (Alternate Reality Game) experiences, in which the events of a single story are told through multiple platforms,<sup>28</sup> opens up new possibilities for technology in American freeform by altering its role from something that enables play to something central to the play experience.<sup>29</sup>

26. Chandler, p. 6.

27. Chandler, pp. 36-37.

28. Jason Cox. “Role-playing games in arts, research and education.” *International Journal of Education through Art* 10.3 (2014): 381-395.

*In Residency*

Lizzie Stark created *In Residency* to explore ideas, themes, and experiences she found prevalent in the art world, and to make those experiences accessible to players who were not professional artists. It was inspired by her own time at an artist's colony, wherein she found juxtaposed within the cloistered walls of the colony "the loneliness of creating art with the sometimes claustrophobic social atmosphere of the colony."<sup>30</sup> She admits that the result has been designed to be more dramatically charged than her own experience, but it nevertheless offers a unique insight on the professional, social, and personal highs and lows in the arts.

Stark employs several techniques in her game that are common to parlor larps, such as a signal between characters that indicates one ought to improvise a monologue (in this case, a fist bump), or a bell to indicate the beginning or ending of particular scenes.

Where the game is truly innovative, however, is in its demarcation and application of communal and personal spaces. The physical space is divided into two large areas and one smaller area: the veranda, in which characters hold serious conversations about their work; the pool house, where characters relax, engage in debauchery, and actively cross social barriers (such as by telling secrets or destroying artwork); and the sculpture garden, which serves as an "off-screen" space for narrative events (such as sex) or for players to take a break as needed. She suggests appropriate lights, furniture, and sound for each setting to create the ideal atmosphere, most significantly the sheet that represents the pool. If a character is on top of the sheet, they still have their bathing suit on. If they are underneath it, they are skinny-dipping. Once three or more people are in the pool, the majority rules and everyone in the pool is either in suits or skinny dipping. These affordances and rules encourage players to engage in specific public/private behaviors.

Each of the physical spaces is focused on particular forms of socialization, and contrast strongly with the intensely personal experience of the guided meditation with which each act of the game begins. During the meditation, the players are instructed to find a space of their own and to listen with their eyes shut as the facilitator describes the sensory input that is feeding their creative efforts for the day and asks questions they tailor to their own particular experience. For this game, the art a character creates is connected to some form

29. For more on overlap on ARGs and larps, see Emily Care Boss. "Of Rabbit Holes and Red Herrings: Interactive Narratives of ARG and Larp." *WyrdCon Companion Book*. Ed. Sarah Lynne Bowman (2013), pp. 22-30.

30. Stark, *In Residency*, p. 8.

of trauma that is meaningful for the character and which was chosen with some randomness at the start of the game. At the end of the meditation, the players open their eyes, the work day over, and are once again thrust into a communal space with one another.

This transforms artmaking in *In Residency*, whether the character creates it from tapping on a keyboard or on a slab of marble, from a visceral and embodied act into an internal exploration of what it might feel like to be an artist, and allows for experiences tailored to both the tastes of the player and those of the character. This is interesting because it troubles the difference between the emphasis on thinking about art in an academic sense—a concept that can be referred to as the *aesthetic tradition*—and experiencing art independently of conscious thought, what arts researchers Jan Jagodinski and Jason Wallin refer to as *aisthetic thought*. Where aesthetics attempts to understand a work by considering and comparing its different facets, aisthetics attempts to “go beyond perceptual standards”<sup>31</sup> and to encounter the arts as a force that exists independently of the will of the artist or the viewer. *In Residency* renders this bifurcation unstable through a process of interpretation and reinterpretation enacted in the meditations, discussions, and revelries of the constructed environment in which the characters exist.

### *Conclusion*

Environments in American freeform games are necessarily representative of the network that exists between the mechanics a designer puts in place, the context of play, and the innovations and alterations enacted by a community of play. But if games are, as art and games researcher Mary Flanagan would have it, “reality engines, frameworks for meaning making,”<sup>32</sup> and if those engines are going to allow us to glimpse what it is like to be other than we are,<sup>33</sup> then each member of that network must pay special attention to how that environment is constructed.

This is not to say that any one person will get it “right,” or that the dialogue around which so much play has centered is necessarily “wrong,” but that in considering these manipulations of environment we encounter new realms of experience and thought. In closing, I would like to repeat the words of games

31. Jan Jagodinski and Jason J. Wallin. *Arts-based Research: A Critique and a Proposal*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2013, p. 46.

32. Mary Flanagan. “Creating Critical Play.” *Artists Re:Thinking games*. Eds. Ruth Catlow, Marc Garrett, and Corrado Morgana. Liverpool, UK: FACT, 2010, pp.49–53, here p. 53.

33. Eisner.

guru Bernard De Koven as a guide for developing these environments, in that “when we all own the game, when we all acknowledge that we are merely trying it on, seeing if it fits, because it might work, no matter who suggested it, we become remarkably, astonishingly empowered.”<sup>34</sup>

34. Bernard De Koven. *The Well-Played Game*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1978, p. 116.

# Theater



# Connecting Stage Acting, Role-Playing, and Improvisation

Sarah Lynne Bowman

One of the most common questions that people ask with regard to the role-playing phenomenon is “How is role-playing like theatre acting?” Indeed, many role-players use the corollary of improvisational theatre in order to explain the concept to outsiders.

My goal is to investigate this correlation in depth, as the two psychological and performative states are clearly similar, if not identical. In what ways can we connect the role-playing experience with that of stage acting and improv? Where are the points of departure between these forms?

To explore this topic, I compare theories and thick descriptions from both role-players and actors. This essay focuses on connecting Keith Johnstone’s Impro<sup>1</sup> connecting his experiments with mask work and other forms of improv with role-playing theory concepts such as *immersion*, *dual consciousness*, *bleed*, *alibi*, and *possession*. My analysis looks at how character immersion is conceived by role-playing theorists, and then turns to discussion of *dissociation* and the *theory of mind*, both of which may illuminate the phenomenon of character enactment.

The goal of this work is to bridge the gap between these performative activities, which have emerged as Western cultural forms in isolation from one another. As performativity and creative expression are essential aspects of the human experience, exploring the phenomenological states involved in acting, improv, and role-playing can help us understand the overall psychology behind the enactment impulse.

## *Distinctions*

In many ways, the activity of immersing into a role-playing character is quite similar to both stage acting and improv. Yet the distinctions between these modes of enactment, however superficial, make a dramatic impact on the *degree of creativity* and *agency* of the performer.

Stage and screen acting often involve performing based upon a script and

1. Keith Johnstone. *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*. New York: Routledge, 1989.



adhering to the physical and emotive instructions of a director. Improvisational acting forgoes the need for a script, as actors spontaneously perform creative roles in simple, usually short scenarios. Both of these forms of acting are usually performed for an external, presumably passive audience.

Role-playing is most similar to improv in that players enact spontaneous, unscripted roles, but for longer periods of time in a persistent fictional world. Additionally, role-playing involves a *first-person audience* rather than external viewership, meaning that the other role-players are the only audience members and are also immersed in their roles.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, we can consider these forms as cousins. Daniel MacKay suggests that scholars view role-playing games as a new, unique form of performance art, offering a detailed description of their aesthetics within this framework.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Jaakko Stenros and Jamie MacDonald have developed an aesthetics of action in order to describe the formal elements of the role-playing experience from the perspective of art and performance theory.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of these distinctions, many similarities exist between these phenomenological states, as explored in the following sections.

### *Atrophy, Transgression, and Constraints*

All adult creative activities require constraints of some sort. While childhood pretend play is more freeform in nature with little, if any, imposed rules, adults require structure and boundaries in order to engage in creative behavior. Keith Johnstone believes that one of the goals of society – and, specifically, of education – is to impose limits on the creative impulse of human beings.<sup>5</sup> Mainstream society encourages its subjects to leave behind pretend play during adolescence. Indeed, Brian Bates explains how Western society once marginalized actors in the same way that role-players have been stigmatized in recent years. Because they enact alternate roles, actors were assumed to be untrustworthy, dangerous, and even criminal.<sup>6</sup>

2. Markus Montola and Jussi Holopainen. "First Person Audience and the Art of Painful Role-Playing." *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*. Eds. Evan Torner and William J. White. Jefferson, NC: 2012, pp. 13-30.

3. Daniel MacKay. *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001.

4. Jaakko Stenros. "Living the Story, Free to Choose: Participant Agency in Co-Created Worlds." *Alibis for Interaction Conference*. Landskrona, Sweden, Oct. 25, 2013. Reprinted as "Aesthetic of Action." [jaakkostenros.wordpress.com](https://jaakkostenros.wordpress.com), Oct. 28, 2013: <https://jaakkostenros.wordpress.com/2013/10/28/aesthetics-of-action/>

5. Johnstone 1989.

Describing the demoralizing process of his own educational experience as a student and a teacher, Johnstone asserts,

*“Most people lose their talent at puberty. I lost mine in my early twenties. I began to think of children not as immature adults, but of adults as atrophied children.”*<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, many adults may think they have no creative impulse left at all when, in reality, their abilities may be simply lying dormant waiting for the opportunity to emerge.

In short, the adoption and performance of new identities and narratives is considered transgressive against society, which otherwise sorts individuals into specific roles and understandings of reality.<sup>8</sup> Stage and screen actors transgress through their ability to effectively convey entirely new identities, performing narratives that may critique or interrogate socio-political norms. Improv actors transgress in their expression of chaotic, impulsive creativity, which often reveals taboo material from the unconscious and even expressions of deep spirituality and vulnerability.<sup>9</sup> Drag performers transgress by temporarily shifting their assigned gender, often in provocative and outrageous ways.<sup>10</sup>

Role-players transgress in a way that mainstream society may find most alarming; they adopt persistent roles in a fictional reality for long periods of time. Outsiders often view this behavior as a rejection of the normative reality to which they all adhere, whereas role-players consider their enactments relatively safe and consequence-free. In the future, like acting, filmmaking, and novel writing, role-playing may become more acceptable as an understood creative form as it gains more positive exposure in media and academia.

All of these performative activities involve what Erving Goffman calls *frame switching*: when an individual shifts from one social role and performative “stage” to another.<sup>11</sup> In each of these cases, the switching of frames is conscious

6. Brian Bates. *The Way of the Actor: A Path to Knowledge & Power*. Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1988, pp. 18-21.

7. Johnstone, p. 25.

8. Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Role-playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010, p. 7.

9. Johnstone, pp. 132-133.

10. Steven P. Schacht and Lisa Underwood, eds. *The Drag Queen Anthology: The Absolutely Fabulous but Flawlessly Customary World of Female Impersonators*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004.

11. Erving Goffman. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. London: Harper and Row, 1974; Gary Alan Fine. *Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago, IL:

and methodical, unlike when we change roles in daily life, e.g., from work to home, etc. Performers understand and play with the notion of switching social stages, behaving in a deliberate and sometimes provocative fashion. In order for these frame switching behaviors to remain possible in our society and for our previously established roles to become reinstated, we must ritualize these experiences by providing a clear beginning, middle, and end to the liminality of the performance.<sup>12</sup>

Other rules of engagement are also necessary for entrance into what game studies theorists call the *magic circle* of play.<sup>13</sup> In stage and screen acting, performers must adhere to a set script written by someone else, the physical blocking and vocal elocution required by the director, and the time constraints of the format. These limits are imposed in order to convey the character and story as effectively as possible to an external audience. These limits are so exacting that Johnstone believes that they stifle the creative impulse of the actor almost completely. Instead, he advocates *improvisation* as the key to an actor's self-expression.

However, even improvisation (improv) has certain constraints. Most improv performances are short, particularly in terms of how long a person immerses into a role or scenario. Although Johnstone often advocates for a serious tone, particularly in his Mask work, most people experience improvisational theatre as comedic, especially with the popularity of groups like ComedySportz, Second City, and the television shows *Whose Line is It Anyway?* The comedic elements allow for the breaking of taboos, emergence of repressed content and its joking dismissal as inconsequential or entertaining.

Role-playing games vary in terms of constraints by genre and form. Tabletop RPGs are bounded by play around a table and often include paper, dice, and other forms of abstract representation. Larps are bounded by time and

University of Chicago Press, 1983. For an excellent recent application, see Olga Vorobyeva. "Entering and Leaving the 'Magic Circle' as Symbolic Acts: The Case of Russian Field Larps." *The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2014* edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman. Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2014, pp. 76–87.

12. Christopher I. Lehrich. "Ritual Discourse in Role-playing Games." *The Forge*. last modified Oct. 1, 2005: [http://www.indie-rpgs.com/\\_articles/ritual\\_discourse\\_in\\_RPGs.html](http://www.indie-rpgs.com/_articles/ritual_discourse_in_RPGs.html); J. Tuomas Harviainen.

"Information, Immersion, Identity: The Interplay of Multiple Selves During Live-Action Role-Play." *Journal of Interactive Drama: A Multi-Discipline Peer-Reviewed Journal of Scenario-Based Theatre-Style Interactive Drama* 1.2 (Oct. 2006), p. 11; Bowman, Functions, pp. 48–53; J. Tuomas Harviainen and Andreas Lieberoth. "The Similarity of Social Information Processes in Games and Rituals: Magical Interfaces," *Simulation & Gaming* (April 10, 2011), pp. 528–549.

13. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, eds. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004; Markus Montola. "Exploring the Edge of the Magic Circle: Defining Pervasive Games," *Proceedings of the Digital Arts and Culture Conference*. Copenhagen, Denmark: 2005.

space constraints. In addition to these physical boundaries, role-playing games also impose limitations on imagination and enactment through rules, norms of the play culture, and genre considerations. These limitations are imposed by the game design, the organizers, and to a certain degree, fellow players.

However, role-playing games offer a *far greater degree of personal agency* than either stage acting or improv. Because the constraint of an audience is no longer a factor, role-players enact their characters mainly for their own edification and in order to engage with one another. While some role-players prefer a dramatic style of play – often called dramatism or narrativism<sup>14</sup>– with grand gestures and vocalizations intended to enhance immersion of other players, the audience still consists of fellow participants, not of passive viewers who expect to be entertained for their money. Therefore the expectations of performativity are different in role-playing, and the experience could be said to be more subjective and personal than grandiose and evocative.<sup>15</sup> As Jamie MacDonald explains, theatrical performance is “beautiful to watch,” whereas role-playing is “beautiful to do.”<sup>16</sup>

### *Immersion and Method Acting*

One intriguing connection between theatrical and RPG enactment emerges when comparing method acting to the “immersionism” style of role-playing. While method acting is most commonly used in stage and screen acting, which adheres to the above-mentioned limitations of pre-scripted and heavily directed characterizations, the “method” involves embodying lifelike performances by creating in the self the feelings and thoughts of the character. Pioneer Sanford Meisner described method as “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances.”<sup>17</sup>

This style of acting corresponds with the immersionist school of role-playing championed by theorists such as Mike Pohjola. Pohjola defines immersion as a form of role-playing in which the player assumes “the identity of the character by pretending to believe her identity only consists of the diegetic

14. John H. Kim. “The Threefold Model FAQ.” last modified Feb. 14, 2003, Darkshire.net: [http://www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/theory/threefold/faq\\_v1.html](http://www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/theory/threefold/faq_v1.html); Ron Edwards. “GNS and other matters of role-playing theory, Chapter 2.” last modified Oct. 14, 2001. The Forge: <http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/1/>

15. Jaakko Stenros. “Nordic Larp: Theatre, Art, and Game.” *Nordic Larp*, edited by Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola. Stockholm, Sweden: Fëa Livia, 2010.

16. Jamie MacDonald. “From Performing Arts to Larp.” *Nordic Larp Talks*. April 11, 2012: <http://nordiclarptalks.org/from-performing-arts-to-larp-jamie-macdonald/>

17. Sanford Meisner. *Sanford Meisner on Acting*. New York: Vintage, 1987.

roles.”<sup>18</sup> Petter Bøckman further explains that immersionism “values living the role’s life, feeling what the role would feel. Immersionists insist on resolving in-game events based solely on game-world considerations.”<sup>19</sup> In this way, both method acting and immersionism require adhering to the external constraints of the aesthetic form while connecting as deeply as possible to the character. In future work, I will compare the specific processes and techniques involved in method acting with those commonly used by immersionists to explore further connections.

*Dual Consciousness, Possession, Bleed, Mask Work, and Alibi*

Examining Johnstone’s *Impro* in more detail, strong parallels exist between the ways in which improv actors and role-players describe their psychological states while engaged in play. While some role-play theorists such as Stenros, Pohjola, and MacDonald have certainly drawn upon acting theories to illuminate the role-playing experience, fascinating patterns emerge when comparing the language used to describe the phenomenon of transforming into character, especially when considering ethnographic research from role-players who are likely unaware of acting literature. This section looks at several concepts highlighted by Johnstone with reference to role-playing: dual consciousness, mask work, alibi, possession, and dissociation. These cursory summaries serve as an outline for future detailed research on these concepts.

Both role-players and actors speak of inhabiting a *dual consciousness* when performing a role in which the player passively observes the actions of the character to greater and lesser degrees. Jaakko Stenros describes it thus: “You have a sort of dual consciousness as you consider the playing both as real – within the fiction – and as not real, as playing.”<sup>20</sup> The degree of consciousness on the part of the observational player can vary throughout the experience. Some players always have a strong sense of distance and control, whereas others seek to abandon their own identity to that of the role. Consider these two quotes from an improv actor and a role-player respectively:

*There is a part of me sitting in a distant corner of my mind that watches*

18. Mike Pohjola. “Autonomous Identities: Immersion as a Tool for Exploring, Empowering, and Emancipating Identities.” *Beyond Role and Play*, edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros. Helsinki, Finland: Ropecon ry, 2004, pp. 84–85.

19. Petter Bøckman. “The Three Way Model: Revision of the Threefold Model for Scandinavian Larp.” *As Larp Grows Up*, edited by Morten Gade, Line Thorup, and Mikkel Sander. Frederiksberg, Denmark: Projektgruppen KP03, 2003, p. 13.

20. Stenros, “Living the Story.”

*and notices changed body sensations, etc. But it's very passive, this watcher – does nothing that criticizes or interferes – and sometimes it's not there at all. Then, it's like the 'I blanks out and 'something else' steps in and experiences. (Ingrid)<sup>21</sup>*

*My ideal, which I achieve occasionally, is to “become” the character fully—I'm just a little background process watching out for OOC [out-of-character] safety concerns and interpreting OOC elements of the scene for [the characters]. They are in the driver's seat; I feel their emotions, have their trains of thought and subconscious impulses, and they have direct control of what I am doing, subject only to veto. (Anonymized role-player)<sup>22</sup>*

In both of these cases, the player becomes a background observer to the character's actions. In the second case, however, the player sometimes intervenes to maintain safety and “veto” the actions of the character if necessary.

In Ingrid's description above, the “I” blanks out for a time, a form of amnesia in which the character takes control of the body. This process is called *possession* in some of the literature for both acting and role-playing theory.<sup>23</sup> Johnstone asserts that such possession is difficult for many to achieve in his *Mask work* exercises, as their ego instinctively wants to retain control: “You feel that the Mask is about to take over. It is in this moment of crisis that the Mask teacher will urge you to continue. In most social situations, you are expected to maintain a consistent personality. In a Mask class, you are encouraged to ‘let go’ and allow yourself to become possessed.”<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, a Mask class likely has a first-person audience rather than the static onlookers of traditional theatre or even improv performance, which makes it more similar to a role-playing exercise in terms of the flexibility of expression.

Brian Bates explains possession in a different fashion: “The traditional actor has a double consciousness; one part is possessed, the other observes and controls.”<sup>25</sup> This definition indicates that the actor may still have some degree of control in a possessed state. Similarly, one of Nathan Hook's participants in a phenomenological study of role-playing immersion explains: “I just let them

21. Ingrid, *qtd. in Johnstone*, 175.

22. Nathan Hook. “A Social Psychology of Immersion Among Live Action Role-players.” *Wyrd Con Companion Book 2012*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Aaron Vanek. Orange, CA: Wyrd Con, 2013, p. 110.

23. For acting theory, cf. Bates; Johnstone. For role-playing theory, cf. Hook, pp. 106-117.

24. Johnstone, 151.

25. Bates, 72.

borrow my body occasionally... [I let my character] take over almost entirely, with just a small background safety thread.”<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, the degree to which a character during conscious enactment can completely take over a person is subject to debate, as is the length of time that such a possession can happen.

In other cases, the personalities of the player and character temporarily merge rather than one superseding the other. This experience may connect to a phenomenon that role-players call *bleed*, where the character’s emotions and thoughts spillover to the player and vice versa.<sup>27</sup> Patrick Stewart, who immersed in the *Star Trek* character of Jean Luc Picard for seven consistent years with little time off, explains:

*“It came to a point where I had no idea where Picard began and I ended. We completely overlapped. His voice became my voice, and there were other elements of him that became me.”*<sup>28</sup>

In this extreme example of prolonged immersion, Stewart was likely experiencing what Whitney “Strix” Beltrán terms *ego-bleed*, where personality contents of the character bleed-out into the player and vice versa.<sup>29</sup> In this example, Picard was not “possessing” Stewart, but rather the frame between the two personalities became weaker and less distinct over time.

Another role-playing concept regarding the distinction between player and character is *alibi*: the idea that the player is neither “present” nor performing the actions in game, but rather, the *character* is. Yet *alibi* is not necessarily equivalent to possession. Rather, *alibi* is a psychological mechanism that permits role-players to transgress normative social rules by playing a new identity in a fictional space without “real world” repercussions. In this sense, *alibi* is more of a defense mechanism than a dramatic shift in one’s psychological state, unlike dual consciousness or possession. Certain ritualized activities

26. Hook, 112.

27. Markus Montola. “The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-playing.” Proceedings of DiGRA Nordic 2010: Experiencing Games: Games, Play, and Players. Stockholm, Sweden, Aug. 16-17, 2010.; Sarah Lynne Bowman. “Social Conflict in Role-playing Communities: An Exploratory Qualitative Study,” *International Journal of Role-Playing* 4 (2013), pp. 17-18; Sarah Lynne Bowman. “Bleed: The Spillover Between Player and Character.” *Nordiclarp.org*, Mar. 2, 2015: <http://nordiclarp.org/2015/03/02/bleed-the-spillover-between-player-and-character/>.

28. Bryan Appleyard. “Patrick Stewart: Keep on Trekkin’.” *The Sunday Times*. Nov. 4, 2007: <http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/culture/arts/theatre/article74502.ece>.

29. Whitney “Strix” Beltrán. “Yearning for the Hero Within: Live Action Role-playing as Engagement with Mythical Archetypes.” *Wyrd Con Companion Book 2012*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Aaron Vanek. Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2012, pp. 91-98.

consciously facilitate alibi, e.g., carnivals, concerts, festivals like Burning Man, Halloween parties, acting exercises, and role-playing games.

Although not termed alibi in *Impro*, Johnstone describes giving improv actors permission to transgress their normal identities, thereby unlocking their creativity. Mask work encourages actors to dissolve their personality and wear a mask to elicit spontaneous, improvised behaviors. This process requires imposing alibi on the exercise: “I have to establish that they will not be held responsible for their actions while in the Mask.”<sup>30</sup> In Johnstone’s experience, many of these mask behaviors resemble regressing into a child state, an animalistic state, or some other pre-verbal state that does not adhere to a fixed social identity.<sup>31</sup> He explains:

[block quote]“Once you understand that you’re no longer held responsible for your actions, then there’s no need to maintain a ‘personality.’”<sup>32</sup>[block quote]

Interestingly, Johnstone believes that this absolution of responsibility is a “trick” and that the final step of the process after this “misdirect[ion]” is for actors to “become strong enough to resume the responsibility themselves. By that time, they have a more truthful concept of what they are.”<sup>33</sup> In this way, alibi is a tool for granting acting students greater access to their own creative selves, which they should learn to accept and reintegrate into their self-concept.

Interestingly enough, Johnstone acolytes such as Alex Fradera have run mask exercises for larpers in minimalistic theatre settings, fusing the role-playing experience with the theatrical. Other experimental role-playing games such as the Nordic larp *Totem* and the blackbox larps *White Death* and *A Beginning* employ techniques similar to masking by limiting the verbal and physical expressions of actors. Through alibi and the magic circle, these experiences encourage role-players to explore interaction outside of the context of our normal social conventions such as speech and contemporary etiquette.

However, the concept of “masking” is more generalizable than these experiments in regression. To a degree, *any* form of makeup or costuming provides both alibi and mask for the player, allowing them to more freely inhabit the character. Both actors and role-players describe how the process of donning a costume and applying makeup is transformative in nature, an observation also made by drag queens when becoming their larger-than-life female alteregos.<sup>34</sup>

30. Johnstone, 165.

31. Johnstone, 168-169, 180-181.

32. Johnstone, 156.

33. Johnstone, 142.

34. Schacht and Underwood.



Furthermore, costumes, makeup, and masks can denote socio-political significance in the context of a persistent world. To use a filmmaking example, if a character is wearing the pope's hat and garb in a movie about the Vatican, he evokes the social meaning ascribed to that station. Similarly, costuming, makeup, and masks "code" characters in larps in particular socially significant ways according to that fictional universe. In this sense, the mask often imposes a new social identity upon role-players while in game, one that may be as fixed and constrained as their existing mundane persona. In a persistent fictional world, characters are often expected to perform a consistent, realistic "self," one that may be similar or different from their normative roles in society. Therefore, role-playing games are not entirely freeform spaces for creative expression; rather, they often adhere to some of the social conventions modeled from traditional society.

Finally, Moyra Turkington offers a role-playing theory that serves as an excellent bridge between each of these concepts. Turkington describes four degrees of immersion with relationship to the relative distance between the primary ego and the character: *marionette*, *puppet*, *mask*, and *possessing force*. The marionette refers to the player having the greatest distance and control over the character, whereas in the possessing force, "the player abandons a personal identity and surrenders to the character object as a goal of play in order to directly experience the full subjective reality of the character."<sup>35</sup> Not only does this description correspond strongly with the immersionism ideal, her choice of terms is particularly useful in the context of theatrical applications; marionettes, puppets, masks, and possession are all forms of theatrical enactment as well. These four categories offer a strong visual representation of how enveloped the player is by the character in terms of personal identification and ego control. Steering theory<sup>36</sup> in role-playing offers another analogy, this time involving driving a car: is the player in the trunk, the back seat, the passenger seat, or behind the wheel?

### *Dissociation and Theory of Mind*

While studying acting and role-playing theory is fascinating, we can also learn much from the field of psychology. Ultimately, I believe that these shifts from one mental frame to the next are forms of dissociation,<sup>37</sup> as psychologist

35. Moyra Turkington. "Getting in the Cockpit." *Sin Aesthetics*. Nov. 17, 2006: [http://games.spaceanddeath.com/sin\\_aesthetics/36](http://games.spaceanddeath.com/sin_aesthetics/36)

36. Markus Montola, Jaakko Stenros, and Eleanor Saitta. "The Art of Steering: Bringing the Player and the Character Back Together." *The Knudepunkt 2015 Companion Book*, edited by Charles Bo Nielsen and Claus Raasted. Copenhagen, Denmark: Rollespilsakademiet, 2014, pp. 106-177.

Lauri Lukka has also explained at length.<sup>38</sup> Dissociation can take many forms, including feeling disconnected from one's body (depersonalization), from reality (derealization) or experiencing amnesia, identity confusion, or identity alteration.<sup>39</sup> In the latter case of identity alteration, the individual's normative sense of ego identity shifts to another developed personality. Although identity alteration is a taboo subject due to its association with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), this ability to shift identities appears to be a normal part of human consciousness, character enactment, and the creative impulse.

Indeed, Johnstone asserts that our personalities are far less stable than we would like to believe. The process of improv involves letting the ego dissolve and allowing other creative manifestations to emerge. These manifestations range from small pieces of imaginative ephemera to fully formed personality structures who can act autonomously from the original ego. For Johnstone, our presented, performed ego is one of many possibilities. He quotes actress Edith Evans, who states, "I seem to have an awful lot of people inside of me."<sup>40</sup> Shifting between these multiple "people" inside a performer is a conscious form of identity alteration, perfected by comedians such as Robin Williams, whose standup routine involved rapid-fire transitioning from personality to personality in an improvisational manner.

Johnstone further explains, "Many actors report 'split' states of consciousness, or amnesias; they speak of their body acting automatically, or as being inhabited by the character they are playing."<sup>41</sup> This reference to amnesia connects to the "blanking out" described by the actor Ingrid above, where the primary consciousness no longer remembers what occurred in character. The degree to which actors and role-players experience full amnesia while immersed in character requires further research, though the enactment experience is often described as ephemeral and confusing, as most liminal moments are.

Along with dissociation, Lukka invokes Piaget's *theory of mind* to describe how such psychological constructs can develop. Most humans have the capacity to conceptualize the consciousness of another person, whether real or imagined. For example, at a certain stage of youth, we learn to imagine what our caretakers might think about a messy room and the consequences that might

37. Bowman, *Functions*, pp. 138-143.

38. Lauri Lukka. "The Psychology of Immersion." *The Cutting Edge of Nordic Larp*, edited by Jon Back. Denmark: Knutpunkt, 2014, pp. 81-92.

39. Marlene Steinberg and Maxine Schnall. *The Stranger in the Mirror, Dissociation: The Hidden Epidemic*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000.

40. Johnstone, 151.

41. Johnstone, 151.

entail; we internalize a model of that authority figure's consciousness within our own to predict behavior and act accordingly.

Fictional characters are no different in this regard. Stage and screen actors must create a theory of mind for their character in order to interpret the way that personality would authentically react to situations. Some actors invest a great deal of time writing backstories for their characters in order to flesh out elements not present in the script, a technique also employed by role-players. Johnstone describes the "interview" improv technique, in which actors interview one another in character, a process also performed in some role-playing workshops.<sup>42</sup> These techniques not only expand the performer's theory of mind for the character, but add a greater degree of personal investment in the creative process of enactment.

### *Summary*

This article provides a cursory examination of ways in which scholars can compare the psychological states of acting and role-playing. Ultimately, the two states seem to closely resemble each other phenomenologically and probably involve identical psychological mechanisms, such as the theory of mind and dissociation. As Stenros and MacDonald have explained, the main distinction between the two forms is that stage acting generally involves performing for an external audience, which requires a certain degree of training, technical precision, structured movement, and scripted lines. Improv performed for an audience faces similar constraints.

Role-playing involves a first-person audience, meaning that the onlookers are the other performers, who are also immersed in their roles. Unlike most improv, role-playing involves immersing into a spontaneous role for an extended amount of time in a persistent fictional world. Players have a strong degree of agency within this framework, less constrained by an audience or director, but are rather limited by the format itself and the rules of engagement. Regardless of these distinctions, the connections between these two forms and the very act of frame shifting into different social roles can offer us fascinating insights into the nature of the psyche and its creative potential.

42. Johnstone, 127.

# Joy and Meaning in Theater Games

Lisa Quoresimo

How do theater games help make meaning for performers and audiences? I came to this question through my work on the production *Charlotte Charke/Mr. Brown*, an experimental musical theater piece about the 18th century London performer who lived much of her<sup>1</sup> life dressed in men's clothing. This theater piece was devised using extensive game play. Theater games drawn from Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone, theater practitioners who developed games to teach acting and improvisation, were used during the rehearsal process. We also made up new games to help us embody our engagement with issues that arose from the script, and even played some of these games in front of the audience during the final performance. However, the playing of our games created such an intensely bonded community that the energy and pleasure of the play was not always communicated to those outside of the playing circle. We began to bridge this gap in meaning through traditional performance techniques such as enlarging the actors' movements and voices to fill the performance space, and extending their energy and awareness outward. The players stepped beyond fourth-wall based Stanislavskian acting techniques as they learned to include the audience, conceptually, as players of their games.<sup>2</sup> This essay has been prompted by the experience of writing and directing *Charlotte Charke/Mr. Brown*; it is a critical analysis that shows how joy, spontaneity, and meaning are built into theater games.

Theater games developed in the twentieth century as a technique for keeping child-like joy and spontaneity in the play of actors of all ages. Viola Spolin developed her use of theater games during her work in the Works Process Administration (WPA) drama program, adapting the games she played

1. Despite the fact that Charlotte lived much of her life as Mr. Brown, she consistently refers to herself in her writings as 'daughter' and 'mother.' Hence my use of the female pronoun.

2. The acting techniques developed by Constantin Stanislavski (1863-1938), or some derivation of them, have dominated European and American theater for the last century. While Stanislavski's circle of attention would eventually open up to include the whole auditorium, see Bella Merlin's description of the four circles of attention, the largest of which includes awareness of sounds outside of the house in which the characters are sitting in the world of *The Seagull*, but none of the circles includes awareness of the audience. Bella Merlin. Konstantin Stanislavsky. New York: Routledge, 2003. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10731831.112-113>

with immigrant children in settlement houses for use in her adult acting classes. Acting teachers and directors today use Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theater* and *Theater Game File* as resources for their warm-ups and actor training.<sup>3</sup> Spolin's son, Paul Sills, used her games to develop the improvisations which are performed at The Second City in Chicago. Since 1959, Second City has trained generations of comedians, from Anne Meara and Jerry Stiller to Tina Fey and Keegan-Michael Key, and the improvisational techniques developed there formed the basis of shows such as "Saturday Night Live" and "Whose Line is it Anyway?". The development of Theatresports, an influential improvisational comedy troupe in Britain, arose from Keith Johnstone's theater game work. Johnstone's work also emphasized spontaneity and his book, *Impro*, laid the foundations of status work, which I address later in this essay. Both Spolin and Johnstone were attempting to get their students to be in the moment, moving away from the more presentational styles of acting which were prevalent in the early-mid twentieth century. The problem I encountered with my cast was that they became so involved in the moment that they were creating meaning for themselves, but not for the audience. Theresa Robbins Dubeck describes Keith Johnstone's exhortations to actors to pay attention to the audience in terms of staying within their 'circle of probability,' but this addresses narrative scene-making, and we were performing the games as a counter to narrative flow.<sup>4</sup> How could I help my actors include the audience in this type of meaning-making without losing any of their joy and spontaneity?

Half of *Mr. Brown* consisted of traditionally scripted scenes, and in the development and rehearsal of these scenes, we used theater games in equally traditional ways. According to acting coach Viola Spolin, "games release spontaneity and create flow as they remove static body movements and bring the actors together physically."<sup>5</sup> Tsunami was one of the games we used to work on these goals. This game begins with the players standing in a circle. One player initiates a brief sound and movement that is repeated quickly by each person around the circle. Once it has traveled the whole way around and been repeated by its initiator, the next person in the circle comes up with a new sound and motion. The game continues until all players have initiated.

3. Viola Spolin. *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999. Also see Viola Spolin. *Theater Game File*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989.

4. Theresa Robbins Dubeck. "Keith Johnstone's 'Circle of Probability': A Concept for Creating Stories That Engage Audiences." *Theatre Topics*. 23.1 (2013), p.45.

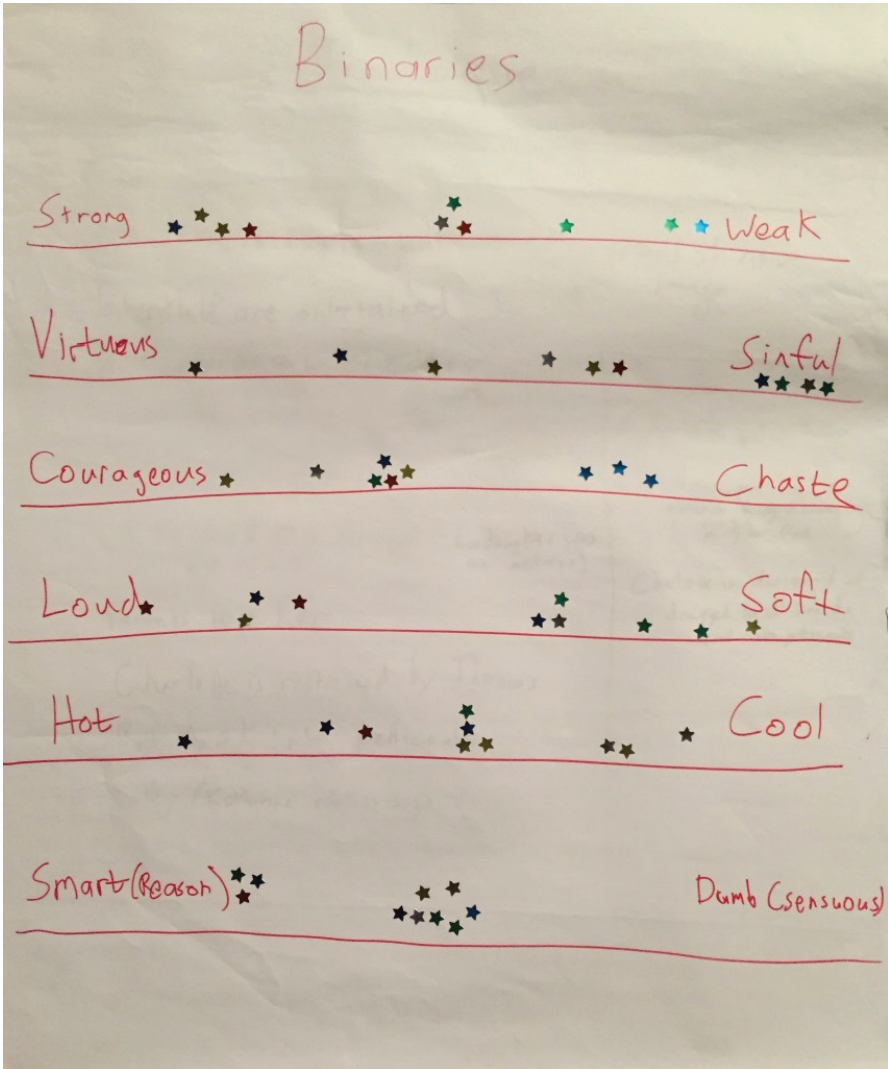
5. Viola Spolin. *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques*. p. 305.

Tsunami works on several levels; it encourages spontaneous reactions, makes the players use their bodies and voices in unaccustomed ways, and has a strong ensemble-building effect. Once an ensemble has embodied these spontaneous responses to each other in a game like Tsunami, they are able to bring that sense of spontaneity into their scripted dialogue and carefully rehearse movements, allowing the audience the illusion of unscripted conversations and interactions.

As we rehearsed the scripted scenes in *Mr. Brown*, we used theater games to heighten our meaning making. Keith Johnstone developed status work to help his actors speak, not theatrically, but “like life as [he] knew it.”<sup>6</sup> I attempted to use his work to heighten the theatricality of the actor’s bodies in order to add layers of meaning to the scene. In one scene where Charlotte, an 18th century actress at the Drury Lane Theater, is visited in her dressing room by a group of noblemen and by her father, the owner/manager of the theater, the actors were having a hard time developing new physical habits. I asked the actors to play a game in which they competed, without speaking, for high or low status, thinking about what their physicality was saying about their relationship to each other.<sup>7</sup> Is the hand on the shoulder a friendly gesture or a patronizing one? Is eye contact always indicative of high status, or can you sometimes show more status by refusing to look at the other person? Through playing competing status games, they were able to achieve an embodied understanding of these subtle differences. When we turned back to the scripted scene, the noblemen were able to physically express an exaggerated high status. Charlotte’s father, Colley Cibber, was able to demonstrate, without saying a word, his lowered status compared to the noblemen and his higher status over Charlotte. The actress playing Charlotte physically expressed her discomfort with her status as a woman in eighteenth century society by competing for status with her father and lowering her status toward the noblemen until their sexual harassment became too much for her. The physicality these student actors found through the status games was large and open enough to make the situation and the stakes clear to the audience. We had used Johnstone’s games to move in the opposite direction from his intended purpose; the scene had gained meaning by becoming meta-theatrical, by pointing at the physical performances that each character had to constantly generate in order to maintain their high or low status.

6. Keith Johnstone. *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*. New York, NY: Routledge/Theatre Arts Books, 1987, p. 33.

7. Keith Johnstone. *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*. New York, NY: Routledge/Theatre Arts Books, 1987, pp. 33–39.



*An example of the exercise through which players defined their characters through binary relations. Image used with permission by the author.*

In addition to the games which had been developed by Johnstone and Spolin, I had to develop some of my own to help foster critical inquiry of gender issues within the group. For example, early in the rehearsal process, we made a list of adjectives that our culture views as gendered, and I gave the cast foil stars to stick on the line between the oppositional adjectives to represent themselves. The actors spent upwards of an hour playing with this chart, and

we held long discussions about what this meant for them and their places on the gender spectrum. At a later rehearsal, I wrote each of these adjectives on a big piece of paper and placed the papers in a circle around the rehearsal space. I asked them to pick a piece of paper, and choose a repeated motion and a sound to illustrate the adjective. We played this for a while, and then I asked them to move from each adjective to its opposite, morphing the motion/sound gradually as they moved across the room. They began moving in groups as they played, so I asked them to move as one group, imitating one another until they found a unified motion and sound for each adjective. After a couple of hours of play, we had developed a game/dance which we performed in the show each night. This game helped the cast reach an embodied understanding of gender binaries, which informed their work on the rest of the show. Although they performed this game each night with joy and spontaneity, and audiences responded positively to it, the meaning of the dance was not overtly clear to many spectators.

Meaning is generated differently when the size of the room and/or the number of recipients changes. Think of the different levels of energy required to communicate in a one-on-one conversation in a quiet room, and the energy required to communicate a similar meaning (without technological enhancement) in a large auditorium to several hundred listeners. As we moved from our rehearsals into our performance space, I knew that the games as they had been played in a small rehearsal room needed to change in order to fit the one hundred fifty seat thrust theater. There were two goals I needed to accomplish. First, with an awareness of the theatrical space as a new body being added to our community, I wanted the cast to integrate the building as part of their ensemble. Second, I needed the cast, as performers, to open up their bodies, voices, and awareness to fill the bigger space. In order to accomplish the first goal, the first thing we did in the theater space was to play a game of sardines. Sardines is a reverse hide-and-seek game; one person hides, and everyone else tries to find them and squeeze into their hiding place with them. After ninety minutes of play, the cast was thoroughly comfortable with every inch of the theater space, and the ensemble had embodied their integration. In order to accomplish the second goal, I expanded our warm-up circle game of tsunami. We had played tsunami in our small room in an intimate circle. In our new space, we played it in a circle which encompassed the back rows of the audience seats and the farthest reaches of the stage area. Playing this way helped them expand their physicality, vocality, awareness, and energy to fit the new, larger theater space.

Despite these improvements, some problems remained. Specifically, the



actors were not yet communicating meaning outside of their ensemble. At a rehearsal, one observer mentioned that, during the game scenes, the actors seemed to be playing for themselves. Realizing this was true, I asked the actors to make the games bigger physically, vocally, and to expand their energy to the walls as they played. They did as I asked, but it still was not quite enough. They had built such an intimate ensemble, what play scholar Johan Huizinga would refer to as, a “feeling of being apart together,” that they made no connection with the audience. During one of the next rehearsals, there were about five observers present, mostly members of our tech crew. I asked them to sit throughout the house, and then asked the players, during the game, to be aware of one specific body in the house at a time, extending their awareness and energy to that body, and then to another, conceptually including them in the playing of the game. Our audiences reacted with laughter and tears, reporting visceral reactions to, and feelings of bodily engagement with, the interludes. The players, without losing the joy and freedom of their play, managed to include in their circle the other present bodies.

Throughout the rehearsal process our use of games as warm-ups, scene builders and problem solvers allowed the cast to be joyful in their play. Their embodied practice of spontaneous interaction helped them bring that spontaneity into even the most scripted repetitions. They discovered meaning through their playful explorations of the issues raised by *Charlotte Charke/Mr. Brown*, and learned how to communicate that meaning across large spaces and to large numbers of spectators. The game playing and meaning-making we did was not constrained by a narrative format; we were exploring issues by playing with our bodies and voices without concern for logical structure or linguistic communication. Part of our work was to point at the performance that Charlotte constantly maintained, whether as Charlotte or Mr. Brown, and so we needed to point at our own performance in a way that was neither presentational nor attempting to be life-like. When Spolin speaks of “increasing of the individual capacity for experiencing” through game play, she is speaking of the actor’s capacity for experience. We increased the audience’s capacity for experience, as well, by including them in our games. The players needed to be in the moment, aware of the moment, and, in order to allow the audience inside of our circle of meaning, include their bodies in each moment of awareness.

# Performativities in Play: Deception in J.L. Austin, Theater, and Games

Jonathan Rey Lee

Is calling someone a ‘good liar’ a compliment or an insult? Or does it depend on the circumstances?<sup>1</sup> Play, for example, complicates simplistic distinctions between real and virtual, tangible and intangible, truth and falsity. As a consequence, play transforms the significance of the language it appropriates. If statements in plays and in play are “lies” insofar as they subvert ordinary notions of truthfulness, then they must be lies of a particularly *interesting* sort. Statements made on stage and in games are meaningful in ways that play with the so-called “ordinary” uses of such statements.<sup>2</sup> In play, language *acts* both by performing actions and by enacting a performance itself.

This article questions the special meaningfulness of playful forms of deception, asking how language in theater and games can use their fundamental unreality to real effect. Such deceptiveness, I suggest, is no simple untruth, but rather establishes the fictionality of theater and the virtuality of games as ways of playing with and within reality.

## *When Saying Becomes Doing*

Building upon Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion that “the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life,”<sup>3</sup> J.L. Austin defines *performative utterances* as ones in which saying becomes doing.<sup>4</sup> For example, statements such as ‘I do’ (during a wedding ceremony), ‘I promise,’ and ‘I wager’ *perform* rather than *describe* social actions.

What happens to performative language within theater and games, forms of social play that blend linguistic and bodily performance? These

1. Two famous polemics—Friedrich Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lies in the Extra-moral Sense” and Oscar Wilde’s “The Decay of Lying”—challenge simplistic assumptions about the naturalness of truth and falsity, arguing that human experience needs certain productive fabrications such as metaphor and art.

2. Indeed, part of this play is to problematize this distinction insofar as the theater and games are woven into (and out of) so-called ‘ordinary’ contexts in many ways.

3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. New York: MacMillan, 1958, §23.

4. J.L. Austin. *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975.

performances, I argue, suspend certain elements of everyday conversation, such as the standard division between truth and lies. At the same time, however, the ‘magic circle’<sup>5</sup> of the stage or game can only suspend so much—meanings inevitably slip between the special circumstances of the play and the social circumstances in which they are embedded. This contextual doubling generates a spectrum of meaningful possibilities for its participants. Playful deceptions, therefore, matter *because* they are simultaneously inconsequential and consequential, because they perform virtual realities that paradoxically may reflect, engage, or subvert the ordinary. This performance, moreover, operates as a kind of language play in which the doubled significance of words as actions generates potentially meaningful tensions, playful experiments with reality and unreality.

#### *Austin on Performatives*

Verbal utterances in and as play deserve more scholarly attention, especially with respect to analog gameplay, which tends to involve plenty of conversation.<sup>6</sup> Austin’s ‘ordinary language’ philosophy is, therefore, relevant to game studies, although Austin himself bypasses contexts such as theater and play, explaining:

*A performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in a soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance—a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use.*<sup>7</sup>

The recognition of the specialness and parasitism that characterizes playful utterances gives a glimpse of Austin’s potential contribution to game studies. Precisely because Austin’s theory is general, yet simultaneously recognizes the particularities of “a sea-change in special circumstances,” it is able to bridge the

5. The ‘magic circle’ is a common term in game studies for the separateness of a play space from everyday life coined by Johan Huizinga and further popularized by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman. See Johan Huizinga. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1949); Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

6. An example of recent work on the topic would be Angelina Ilieva. "How We Do Larps With Words," *Playing Reality*. Ed. Elge Larsson. Stockholm: Interacting Arts, 2010, pp. 231-242.

7. Austin, p. 22.

dual uses of language to constitute play within the game and circulate playfully around the game.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, this language of context-dependency might be used to more precisely articulate the interplay between the nested contexts of the game and its social milieu than the somewhat overused metaphor of the magic circle.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Austin's method of reading language *as* performance provides a compelling foundation for studying language *in* performance and, by extension, *in play*. Gameplay is not only interactive and performative *like* language, but is often interactive and performative *through* language. After all, in games, *words do things*. Finally, Austin is particularly relevant to an exploration of playful deception because he shows how *as* actions words confound typical notions of truth and falsity. In short, Austin helps elucidate how linguistic performances can become actions that can, in special circumstances, become play.

As performances that generate actions, performative statements become meaningful in relation to when, where, why, how, by whom, and to whom they are uttered. That is, the significance of a statement is *context-dependent*. Understanding performatives requires understanding their circumstances, including implicit and explicit social conventions, particularities of the material environment, and roles of individual participants. This means, moreover, that performatives are not purely linguistic phenomena, but are moves within larger social practices.<sup>10</sup>

Statements mean (and do) more than they say. Take, for example, the statement "keep calm and relax" displayed on a throw pillow in someone's home. This statement performs the actions of *advising* and *inviting* the reader to keep calm and relax. It advises by being overtly displayed<sup>11</sup> where it will be read as applicable wisdom. It invites, moreover, by alluding to its immediate material context: a comforting environment within which the advice can be followed. In these ways, this printed utterance performs an active role within

8. See Sicart's distinction between 'play' and 'playfulness.' Miguel Sicart. *Play Matters*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014.

9. In my view, what is typically called the "magic circle" is not the separateness of the play context from the everyday context, but the appearance of separateness brought about by the doubled meanings that arise from the simultaneity of the play and everyday contexts.

10. In this way, Austin's work contributes to social constructivist notions like that of John Searle, who developed his famous speech act theory from Austin's work. What I find particularly compelling about Austin is that his philosophy—like Wittgenstein's—is more playful than some of this later work, being more a performance of reading ordinary language than a systematic theory of language or society.

11. If the pillow were put in storage, the sentence on it would not be an utterance at all because it would fail to circulate or be received.

the social contexts in which it is encountered, doing something for its readers *by* saying something to its readers. Although play performatives may differ from this everyday example, they nonetheless make meaning in similarly contextual ways. For example, a verbal utterance in a play may initiate a promise between two characters and an utterance in a game may count as a move within the game—advancing a guess, initiating a battle, selecting an available action, etc.

Understanding any performative, therefore, entails understanding both how the conventions of its context determine what actions are performed *and* how the purposes of its context structure how it is to be received. Understanding play, likewise, entails understanding the play context as systematically shaping how language performs. Contexts structure both the performance and reception of linguistic actions, determining both meaningfulness and appropriateness. Performatives (as actions) are threatened not by falsity but by *infelicity*, “*the things that can be and go wrong* on the occasion of such utterances.”<sup>12</sup> Certainly, statements can go wrong in many ways, as when a player fails to make a move within a game by stating an action that is not allowed by the game rules.

Somewhat surprisingly, however, Austin draws on an ethics of speaker intentions to argue that performatives may succeed and still be infelicitous. False and broken promises are, for example, successful promises that play an improper role within their social circulation because they lack sincere intentions or are not fulfilled. They are not quite lies—because they are actions rather than assertions—but they have something of the feel of lies. They are, in Austin’s terminology, *abuses*—not necessarily in the sense of being unethical, but of being abnormal or aberrant uses that undermine the social function of promises. This kind of abuse can also occur on stage or in games—for example, in disinterested acting or the play of a spoilsport—but is not characteristic of the productive deceptiveness of plays or play in general. Contrary to abuses like lies and false promises that undermine proper uses, theater and games properly belie everyday reality in ways that powerfully reflect or represent that reality.

Performative language, therefore, contributes both to the constitutive deceptiveness of the fictionality and/or virtuality of play in general and to the particular uses and abuses of deception within these play spaces.

### *Onstage Performatives*

Turning first to the theater, the stage seemingly depletes performative content, since actors are not beholden to statements they make while performing their

12. Austin, p. 14.

roles. The same words spoken in the same tone by the same individuals might be a proposal, promise, or insult *offstage*, but count as none of these *onstage* as actors are not expected to become engaged, promised, or insulted as a result. It is tempting, therefore, to consider stage performance as inimical to linguistic performativity, the theater as all saying and no doing. While onstage performatives certainly differ from most conversational ones, it would be a mistake to minimize the complex ways linguistic performativity bears on stage performance. Plays gain significance as an interplay between a staged fictional world and the reality of the stage itself. Within this doubled context, words themselves may take on special doubled significance as they simultaneously gain special meaning within the play and reflect or refract their everyday meanings.

Stage performatives are genuine insofar as they apply not to the actors but to the *fictional characters* they play. There is nothing strange about uttering genuine performatives on behalf of others, as interpreters and messengers routinely do. And there is nothing strange about fictional language becoming meaningful in much the same way that ordinary language does. Therefore, although we do not consider actors beholden to the statements they make, we do consider *characters* so beholden—if in the first act the actor utters a marriage proposal, promise, or insult, we fully expect this to influence the subsequent story. Staged language is certainly differently consequential from offstage language, but I believe it is precisely this difference that makes fiction so meaningful. Thus, whereas Austin writes that “Walt Whitman does not seriously incite the eagle of liberty to soar,”<sup>13</sup> this statement has both force and seriousness when its doubled meaning as an expressive poetic image and metaphorical rhetorical incitement to the reader are properly understood. If such theatrical, fictional, and poetic language is fundamentally ‘deceptive,’ it is deceptive in a way that generally aims not to mislead but to express.

Onstage performatives have additional force insofar as they are directed to the audience, encouraging spectators to participate in producing the significance of the spectacle. The stage invites the audience to share in the deception, to collectively *dream* rather than *lie*. Devices such as the soliloquy or aside, for instance, allows the spectator to share intimate secrets, promises, or insights with a character. Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, for example, famously concludes with an address to the audience beginning with the performative: “If we shadows have offended, / Think but this, and all is mended.” Couched as a playful apology, Puck’s soliloquy is essentially an invitation to engage in the play’s fantasy rather than judge its reality. This

13. Austin, p. 104.

performative invitation is characteristic of an influential approach to theatrical performance famously articulated by playwright Bertolt Brecht, who argues that exposing the artificiality of the theater opens up certain forms of theatrical meaning-making.<sup>14</sup>

I experienced this at a play called *Best of Enemies*, a dramatization of the radical transformation of a KKK member based on a true story. As one might expect, the play featured quite a few rather nasty racist insults.<sup>15</sup> While this was uncomfortable for spectators and actors alike (as one actor admitted in a post-play discussion), the staging was designed to situate the performance within a retrospective historical lens, using old newspaper headlines as a backdrop and period-appropriate music to accompany scene changes. Maintaining a realistic sense of the illocutionary force of the insults *within* the fiction while situating these insults within this historical consciousness created a kind of performative contract with the audience, a promise to redeem that language within the social justice motivation of the theatrical experience. Similarly, the design of a game conditions the relationships players develop with the game. To play is, in a sense, to navigate the game as stage. Insofar as players are actors, therefore, they use language in this theatrical way—to advance roles that have significance in how they are received by others who are both spectators and fellow participants within the world of the game.<sup>16</sup>

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Best of Enemies* both intentionally highlight the artificiality of the stage to provide their audiences a particular self-awareness about the performance and its performative language. This is by no means the only way to navigate the double-layered context of the stage. The imperatives of realism, for example, suggest that plays be designed and performed to create a parallelism between the play's real and fictional contexts. Even as its artificial setting reminds the audience that it is just a story, for example, *Best of Enemies* strives to remind us that it is a *true* story and presents itself as realistically documenting America's history of racial violence. In so doing, the play echoes another of Shakespeare's famous lines by reminding us that "all the world's a stage," suggesting that the KKK's performative rhetoric is itself a social script and that its members are "merely players" stubbornly acting

14. Nick Mizer also uses Brecht to discuss 'non-immersive gaming' in the first issue of *Analog Game Studies*. Nick Mizer. "'Fun in a Different Way': Rhythms of Engagement and Non-Immersive Play Agendas." *Analog Game Studies* 1.1. <http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/08/179/>.

15. Insults are a form of performative that, as Austin discusses, demonstrate the importance of uptake because they must be felt as well as understood. Thus, the formulation 'I hereby insult you' generally fails to successfully insult someone.

16. At least in standard multiplayer games.

out the fiction that their world is designed for them alone. Just as the artificiality of the staging reminds the audience that the actor is not the character, this realistic scripting and acting suggests that the character is not the role, as demonstrated by the character's growing disenchantment with racist identity politics that drives the *Bildungsroman* plot. In fact, the loci of Brecht's artificial theater and realism represent but two points on a vast spectrum of possible ways to navigate the interplay of the real and the fictional, which produces a multiplicity of generative possibilities that characterize theatrical play. Similarly, gameplay performances are arrayed along a spectrum of possibilities that navigate a tension between distance and immersion that often accompanies gameplay. Although theater and games are by no means identical, I believe they are both appropriately termed *play* for this reason—that they perform a meaningfully doubling of fictional/virtual play spaces and the interpretive contexts that circumscribe them.

#### *Performatives in Gameplay*

Just as theatrical performatives do not fully bear on actors, gameplay performatives do not fully bear on players. Yet, as with their theatrical counterparts, gameplay performatives only suspend so much.<sup>17</sup> As statements circulate in and around the game, they gain significance through the interplay of two overlapping interpretive contexts, namely the *conversational* and *gameplay* contexts.<sup>18</sup> In some cases, statements are clearly situated within one of these contexts, but this is often not so clear. A statement, for example, may be ambiguous as in how the imperative “pass the chips” may refer either to tokens within a poker game or snacks outside the game. More common, however, are hybrid cases that fall along an interpretive spectrum generated by the blending of the two contexts. This includes various forms of metacommentary—discussing, explaining, exclaiming, strategizing, asking, congratulating, taunting, etc.—that address gameplay from its conversational context. It also includes a range of gameplay performatives that link verbal game actions to the conversational context, such as “check” in *Chess* (a metacommentary warning that functions as a game action insofar as its utterance is mandated by the rules). Similarly, performative utterances may

17. Also drawing on Austin, Ian Bogost's post “Persuasive Games: Performative Play” explores unusual cases in videogames where in-game actions are also actions outside the game.

18. More accurately, at least two, since contexts often overlap in everyday circumstances. For example, any or all of the following contexts might be layered atop the conversational and gameplay contexts: a tournament, a charitable fundraiser, a gaming organization, a coffee shop, a local community, a national community, etc.



shorthand non-verbal moves (as in correspondence *Chess*) and even end, suspend, or alter the game within the meta-discourses of the ‘forfeit,’ ‘time out,’ and ‘do-over.’

Since gameplay is a symbolic activity, *saying* becomes *doing* often and in many ways. While not all statements made during play are performative in the same way, there are some common conventions for translating speech into game actions. It would be impossible to fully capture this dynamic range of possibilities in a simple taxonomy, so I shall briefly present three examples of the diverse uses of (deceptive) performative language in gameplay, specifically in guessing and trivia games, gambling games, and social deception games. In each case, game design facilitates a particular kind of interplay between the conversational and gameplay contexts, relying on their simultaneous unity and disunity to generate play.

#### *Guessing and Trivia Games*

One of the more straightforward interplays can be found in guessing and trivia games (*Trivial Pursuit*, *Twenty Questions*, *Charades*, etc.) and game shows (*Wheel of Fortune*, *Jeopardy*) that involve answer-giving as a performative that submits itself for evaluation. Most such games directly involve real world contexts, aiming at matching verbal game moves to facts about the world (or its language). The challenge of such games is usually the difficulty in forging the desired link between gameplay and reality due to the deployment of uncommon knowledge, partial information, and/or time constraints.

Complicating such straightforward guessing games, deceptive guessing games like *Balderdash* and *Wise and Otherwise* require players to invent plausible fictions that lure other players into believing them to be the correct real-world response. In these games, the acts of writing the fictions and of voting for particular responses both function as gameplay performatives that simultaneously commit the player to actions within the game and a stance towards truth or plausibility<sup>19</sup> outside the game. As *Balderdash* asks players to complete incomplete facts and *Wise and Otherwise* asks them to complete incomplete aphorisms, both games bring the world outside the game into the game as an object of play. Most guessing games rely on fluency with discourses outside the game, bringing not only the social context but also knowledge and competencies from players’ everyday lives into play.

19. This relationship is subverted but not eliminated if a player chooses to write or vote for answers that are silly rather than plausible.

*Gambling Games*

When guessing games bring the real world into play, they often trivialize it—hence the term ‘trivia.’ Gambling games, in contrast, are at once trivial and serious as the increased stakes render the play consequential in a real-world sense.<sup>20</sup> According to Jesper Juul, the possibility—but non-necessity of—real-world consequences is definitional of games (he calls this *negotiable consequences*).<sup>21</sup> Thus, so-called gambling games can, like *any* game, be played for any stakes. The design of a gambling game like poker, however, aligns with real-world consequentiality such that even when no money is involved the game nonetheless *plays at* gambling. In fact, the relative simplicity and luck-dependence of the hidden information card games that underlie poker facilitates an emphasis on wagering. The wagers themselves are generally conducted through verbal performatives which draw a parallel between the conversational and gameplay contexts—one wagers chips within the game that are associated with money, whether in fact or in play. As a zero-sum game whose play aims at the circulation and accumulation of chips (which both conventionally represent and mimic money by being abstract signifiers of value), to play poker is to gamble, even if only to gamble signifiers. Wagering is, in fact, an everyday performative that is adopted and adapted in poker’s game design. As with its everyday counterpart, wagering within poker is subject to standards of felicity and infelicity. While certainly deceptive, however, bluffing is no abuse in Austin’s sense because the performance of the wager does not require claiming anything about the particularities of one’s hand. Instead, the actual abuse in poker would be wagering what one is unwilling or unable to pay.

*Social Deception Games*

The lying within social deception games such as *Mafia*, *Avalon*, and *Bang!* generally lack the explicit consequences of gambling (although *social* capital can be staked and lost) that so strongly link conversational and gameplay contexts. Instead, the lying in such games often depends upon the disunity between these contexts, constituting both a legitimate *move* within the game and an illegitimate *description* of the game. This disunity, moreover, reveals the

20. Raising the stakes of play moves towards what is sometimes called ‘deep play’ after Clifford Geertz’s essay of the same name.

21. Jesper Juul, “The Game, the Player, the World: Looking for a Heart of Gameness,” Level Up: Digital Games Research Conference Proceedings, ed. Marinka Copier and Joost Raessens. Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2003, pp. 30–45.

constitutive oxymoron of *social deception* games which are designed to promote social interaction by subverting social norms.<sup>22</sup>

In the card game *Coup*, for example, each player receives two hidden characters which enable certain game actions. Any player may perform any action, but that player must be able to produce the corresponding character card if challenged or suffer the consequences (the challenger suffers the consequences otherwise). The first time I played this game, I developed a verbal tic of using unnecessarily oblique language, saying “I declare myself to be the Contessa” rather than “I am the Contessa.” In Austin’s view, these statements are identical performatives except that the first is unnecessarily explicit. Within the doubled context of play, however, these statements differ significantly—the first performs a move within the game *without* making a corresponding infelicitous statement (i.e. lying) whereas the second does both. In this way, such games play with social norms regarding truth and falsity by establishing a context in which certain forms of deceptiveness become viable social interaction. These performatives entail performances, as players’ success in deceiving others depends on their ability to lie convincingly—being a ‘good liar’ may be acceptable or even desirable. At the same time, since social interaction is one purpose of such games, their play treads a delicate balance between maintaining and suspending social relationships.

Thus, there is another spectrum at work in performative gameplay—a spectrum of player response, the diverse individual reactions that players may take when confronted with the interplay of conversational and gameplay contexts. At one end of the spectrum, deception games play with the psychology of *lying aversion*,<sup>23</sup> in which individuals experience difficulty lying even in circumstances where lying is warranted or permissible. At the other end of the spectrum, the carnivalesque pleasure of deception gameplay depends upon transgressing commonplace norms within the playful suspension of everyday reality. Lying aversion and carnivalesque pleasure are, in fact, sides of the same coin—the taboo makes the transgression pleasurable yet fraught. Thus, more than a simple spectrum, there is an entire topography of differing play responses which waver, touch, and blend within the doubled context of the gaming experience.

22. Something similar is the purpose of the taboo-defying game *Cards Against Humanity*, which uses the magic circle to—for good or ill—trivialize the uttering of otherwise offensive statements.

23. Uri Gneezy has done several controlled experiments on lying aversion (primarily in economic transactions). He notes that such aversion varies amongst the general population.



*Claiming to be the Contessa (far right) in Coup can counteract pesky assassinations, but being caught in that lie could instantly lose one the game. Image by Indie Boards and Cards, used with permission.*

### *Conclusion*

Both theater and gameplay maintain a doubled context for utterances to attain meaningfulness both within and outside the magic circle. Theater performs fictions by staging performative language that simultaneously generates distance and intimacy with the audience. Similarly, gameplay depends upon entering a rule-governed virtual play space that suspends certain aspects of the everyday but simultaneously gains significance from the social contexts within which the game is played. Any incongruities between these doubled interpretations should, I argue, be understood as a complex play of reality and unreality. In gameplay, deception can be a form of *play-acting* (both acting and play) which, like theatrical play, depends upon performing a role that crosses between reality and unreality. While play-actors are not necessarily beholden to their performative utterances, their performance is a meaningful experience of slipping in and out of the game-stage, an interplay which I suggest is part of what makes such performances *play*. Saying becomes doing in theatrical and gameplay contexts precisely because language is always a performance, whether social, theatrical, or playful. Or, to put it another way, theater and games are special circumstances in which *saying* can become *playing*. Indeed, performatives seem peculiarly at home in plays and in play—perhaps because

these activities are, after all, some of the important ways we explore how to do things with words.

# New Spaces



# Cocktail Cabinets: A Critique of Digital and Ludic Essentialism

Samuel Tobin

Scene: I'm at Quarters arcade in Hadley, MA sitting at *Tapper*, the cocktail cabinet edition, pint aglow from beneath as I try to get my bartender to the end of the bar in time to catch empty steins. I take a drink, try to serve a drink. Game Over. My wife comes over and she spreads the alternative weekly across the cabinet. Should we get hot dogs?

If we wanted to understand this scene we would want to know all about *Tapper*, but not just how I failed to keep up with its virtual patrons. We could move from screen to scene, enacting a shift in objects of study. This is a move from object to subject, from text to reader, from game to player – but it could also be a move from one set of objects to another, toward new kinds of things. Across the academy we see a move to study objects in new ways, not just in the current waves of Speculative Realism and Object Oriented Ontology, but also as part of a longer, slower, material turn.<sup>1</sup> This turn orients us toward things and toward objects, signaling a shift within game studies toward the spaces of the player.<sup>2</sup> Understanding the cocktail cabinet in the context of these shifts adds important material and spatial dimensions to game studies' readings of characters, mechanics, and settings, along with the technical systems that enable and constrain those phenomena.

We redefine our objects as we go – to understand the cocktail cabinet from the perspective of players' bodies, their compartments and postures, their practices, their desires and their attitudes. The cocktail cabinet becomes many things: a table for drinks, an impromptu bench or coat rack, a dinner table, an ashtray, a place to grade papers, to hold hands, to do drugs, light candles,

1. Mark Fisher. "Speculative Realism." Frieze Blog. May 11, 2009. [http://blog.frieze.com/speculative\\_realism/](http://blog.frieze.com/speculative_realism/)

2. Helen Cunningham. "Mortal Kombat and Computer Games Girls." In *Electronic Media and Technoculture*. Ed. John Thornton Caldwell. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press. 1984. See also: Raiford Guins. "'Intruder Alert! Intruder Alert!' Video Games in Space." *Journal of Visual Culture* 3.2 (2004), pp. 195–211. James Hodges. "Antagonism, Incorporated: Video Arcades and the Politics of Commercial Space." *Media Fields Journal*. May 7, 2014. <http://www.mediafieldsjournal.org/antagonism-incorporated/2014/5/7/antagonism-incorporated-video-arcades-and-the-politics-of-co.html>. Jesper Juul. *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2009.



spill drinks, or even a play surface for fully analog games like *Connect-4* (1974) and Poker. This is not enough; we re-define and re-name our human subjects and objects too. People do many things with these units besides playing (with) them.

What are these activities? Cocktail cabinets are not just tipped-over upright cabinets. Cocktail cabinets are part of a different constellation and genealogy of game tables, descended from the practices of play and sociality that come with them. If we take a step back and look at the posture of a cocktail cabinet player, and not at the game being played, we see a bodily comportment and disposition that goes further back and farther afield than the 1970s birth of the object.<sup>3</sup>

Approached from this perspective we start to pay less attention to the digital nature of the games played through the system. It does not matter so much then whether one is sitting at an 1800s convertible backgammon and chess table, a 1900s green velvet-lined card table, or a 1980s cocktail unit. These tabletop gaming scenarios seem particularly akin to one another when we investigate them as assemblages of bodily and social factors that define a moment of play.<sup>4</sup> These connections might be issues of, for example, the body and its techniques,<sup>5</sup> of control,<sup>6</sup> of training and rhythms,<sup>7</sup> of temporal and spiritual dispositions,<sup>8</sup> or of settings and contexts, in this case modes of public seated play, likely in taverns or cafes.<sup>9</sup> I want to show the ways in which we can trace a different genealogy and trajectory, really a range of them, for the cocktail cabinet. My goal here is not just to challenge the traditional, invention-heavy narratives of arcades and public play— this has been done very well already by, for one, Erkki Huhtamo in his “Slots of Fun, Slots of Trouble” and “From Kaleidoscomaniac to Cybernerd,” where he performs a “media archaeology” of games’ culture and history.<sup>10</sup>

3. Erkki Huhtamo. "From Kaleidoscomaniac to Cybernerd. Towards an Archeology of the Media." *Leonardo*. 30.3 (1997), pp. 221-224.

4. T.L. Taylor. "The Assemblage of Play." *Games and Culture* 4.4 (2009), pp. 331-339.

5. Marcel Mauss. *Techniques, Technology and Civilization*. Edited by Nathan Schlanger. New York: Berghahn Books, 2006.

6. Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish*. New York City: Vintage Books, 1975/1995.

7. Henri Lefebvre. *The Critique of Everyday Life: The One-Volume Edition*. New York: Verso Books, 2014.

8. Walter Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002.

9. David Nasaw. *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

10. Huhtamo, "From Kaleidoscomaniac to Cybernerd." Erkki Huhtamo. "Slots of Fun, Slots of Trouble" *Handbook of Computer Games Studies* edited by Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005, pp. 1-21. Laine Nooney, in a footnote, also offers an important

Rather, my goal is to contribute to a critique of digital essentialism that amends certain fixations on the digital and computational aspects of video gaming.

This is my critique of game studies' digital essentialism: it is too narrow, too focused, too on the nose to account for messier contextual approaches. In particular, I am interested in looking at how the genealogy of game tables is also one of leisure, time killing, intoxication, and something like the playful but non-gaming use of game technologies. In looking at how cocktail cabinets, which could be classified as electronic games, are also other things with alternate cultural histories and possibilities, we connect these objects to people and practices from which they would otherwise be artificially cut off. In doing so, we have to (get to?) critique various popular essentialisms and assumptions about them.

Part of this shift and redefinition is an issue of names. Why not call these cabinets "sit-down models?" The term is used from time to time, but is too broad for my purposes here. Sit-down units could include some kind of sitting inside or astride, common among driving, flying and riding games, likely to feature controls alluding to some form of steering. In short, while you might sit down to play *Chase* (1976) or *Outrun* (1986), this is a different kind of sitting, and a different kind of playing than we see among cocktail units.

The acts of *sitting* and *playing* are tightly linked in the cocktail unit: the way one does either is informed by the other. The posture of the player is quite different from that of the upright cabinet or ride-game (to say nothing of the home system.)<sup>11</sup> Cocktail cabinets, as I approach them, are distinct from all other game units which might feature upward-facing screens. I echo Kevin Smith's blog post on the subject, separating "standing around games" from the cocktail form.<sup>12</sup> My focus here is on sit-down, flat, glass- or plastic-topped, screen-up cocktail cabinets. But why "cocktail"?

The designation "cocktail" connects these objects to modes of adult leisure

correction to the excavation metaphors wrapped up in media archaeology work-- see "A Pedestal, A Table, A Love Letter: Archaeologies of Gender in Video Game History" *Game Studies*. 13.2 (2013). <http://gamestudies.org/1302/articles/nooney>.

11. Erkki Huhtamo. "What's Victoria Got to Do with It?: Toward an Archaeology of Domestic Video Gaming." *Before the Crash: Early Video Game History*. Edited by Mark J.P. Wolf. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2012, pp. 30-52. See also Chapter 5 ("I'd Rather Sit and Play") of Samuel Tobin. *Portable Play in Everyday Life: The Nintendo DS* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

12. Kevin Smith. "Preliminary Report - What Was the First Cocktail Table Video Game?" *The Golden Age Arcade Historian*, Nov. 8, 2012. <http://allincolorforaquarter.blogspot.com/2012/11/preliminary-report-what-was-first.html>. Kevin Smith's blog is a fantastic resource for those interested in all manner of Arcade issues, but his treatment of the cocktail unit is particularly important to this essay.

distinct from the frankly over-exposed milieu of the arcade. It also reinforces the table-like aspect of the object, crucial for its multimodal role as locus of drinking, socializing, public leisure and related activities; this is quite separate from a game's digital or electronic qualities, distinct perhaps from its ludic qualities as well. One need not have a drink, alcohol or otherwise, in order to use these cabinets – but it does not hurt. These are not just game tables, but drinking tables as well. That genealogy, of drinking and playing, of playing while drinking, is a rich one worth unpacking. The connection between play and intoxication is powerful. Indeed, we can learn much about each phenomenon by reading it against its other. It may not matter so much whether play is digital or analog, which may not matter any more than exactly what sort of drink is consumed. These specifics matter to the person drinking or playing, but matter much less in the aggregate.

Does it matter if these games were for one or two players? Yes, if we only look at them from the perspective of a player navigating or operating a digital game. On the other hand, the relations between people conducted in and through a digital game are not only that of player and non-player, as James Newman illustrates.<sup>13</sup> The range of not-quite-players, on-lookers, co-players and backseat drivers can be quite complicated. The play that goes on a cocktail cabinet could be verbal as well as digital, teasing as well as offering tips. The active, hands-on-controller player is not necessarily the only one playing.

But what if, in certain cases, the players are alone? I have been stressing the social nature of these cabinets, but surely they are also played by solitary individuals. Unaccompanied individuals also use cocktail cabinets without playing them. I graded many papers on a cocktail cabinet as a graduate student – that I do not remember what games they were is telling of my relationship to them. What I remember instead is a scene: my work, a bar in the afternoon, nearly empty; I recall the rhythms of everyday life and the small, pleasing distractions of working on (top of) a game.

So yes, let us move away from fixation on the digital – but let us also try to move away from essentializing games as an object of study. To flatten the videogame, arcade game or cocktail cabinet into an essentially digital object is clearly a problem – but to assume it is also essentially a *game* is problematic as well. The problem is that when we cast things like cocktail cabinets as games or game systems, we shut out all of the other things that they are, have been,

13. James Newman. "The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame." *Game Studies* 2.1 (2002).  
<http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/newman>

or could be, ignoring the ways in which people relate to games outside of the player position.

If we bring together the object's past and future, we open up new areas and objects of analysis. We could look at the cabinet's past as plans, sketches, designs, living trees, particle board, acrylic, copper vein, and coiled wire. We can examine its future too, perhaps as the objects of collection, preservation and curation addressed in Raiford Guins' book *Game After*.<sup>14</sup> At a smaller time scale, these things are different after-hours or behind the scenes. Consider the professional and labor relations that repair people, bartenders and cleaning crews have with the cocktail cabinet. In the even tighter context of customer use, think of the rich and complex ways we relate to these things in their bars, restaurants and arcades. Even in these ludically charged contexts, cocktail cabinets go unplayed (much) more often than not. Studying them only (or even primarily) as games or playthings looks less and less tenable when we consider these factors. And yet, even when used as a table for drinking rather than game play, the cocktail cabinet retains some playful qualities. How do we account for this?

We might not play *Ms. Pac-man* (1981), but we still watch her run her maze from the corner of our eye, setting our drinks on top of her screen while talking with friends. That must matter somehow. We flick joysticks or tap unresponsive buttons as the high scores scroll. Perhaps witnessing the screen's animated glow, rising through our Manhattan – part décor, part optical novelty, part nostalgia – is its own kind of playful engagement with a cocktail cabinet.

This relationship with the cocktail unit is one in which *everything but the game* matters, and yet the game is a literal foundation upon which all other practices are enacted. This is not unique; other screen-based media have similarly diffuse holds in space. The television's ambient influence is most pervasive,<sup>15</sup> but other kinds of games and play work similarly – think of what most people really enjoy during a baseball game.

If we look “where the action is”, to invoke Erving Goffman<sup>16</sup> and McKenzie Wark,<sup>17</sup> examining the space of play rather than the space of a game, to what degree are we really interested in games, or play, or even players as such? Does it matter? Maybe the future of Game Studies is not just studying games.

14. Raiford Guins. *Game After: A Cultural Study of Game Afterlife*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014.

15. Anna McCarthy. *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001.

16. Erving Goffman. *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1959.

17. McKenzie Wark. *Gamer Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.



# Foursquare: Bodily Transgression in Gamified Spaces

Maxwell Foxman

When do we stop playing? As games pervade diverse aspects of our everyday lives, the play experience seems to never cease and this question becomes progressively difficult to answer.

Studies of “gamification,” a concept commonly defined as “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts,”<sup>1</sup> tend to focus on the creation and production of games rather than the bodily experience of their players. These technically-minded analyses, however, are much akin to a study of soccer pitches that ignores soccer *players*. Interactions between a gamified application’s “rules” and the activities of its players provide many moments of insight that are not apparent when focusing strictly on the game itself. Transgression is one such moment.

The idea of “transgression” is taken from anthropology—a field concerned with the cultural shaping of bodily activity since Marcel Mauss’ pioneering studies of motion and movement techniques.<sup>2</sup> However, I draw primarily from the work of Michael Taussig.<sup>3</sup> Transgression, in this context, is polysemic, ranging from acts of hubris, deviations or departures, to the more traditional definitions of misbehavior, infringement and even mutilation. In all cases, it represents a breach, a move that makes it extraordinary. This transgression feels inappropriate, yet verges on the transcendent or sacred. Any breaking or bending of a rule or code may fall into this definition.

Points of transgression are multitudinous, so ingrained in daily activity that they are difficult to discern. Taussig contends that transgression acts as a “barrier” of “repulsion and attraction, open and closed at the same time,” found simultaneously within the extreme and the quotidian of the interaction. Such transgressions do not have set boundaries, but “erupt into being,”<sup>4</sup> through

1. Sebastian Deterding, Dan Dixon, Rilla Khaled, and Lennart E. Nacke. “Gamification: Toward a Definition” CHI 2011. (2011), p. 1.

2. Marcel Mauss. “Techniques of the Body.” *Techniques, Technology and Civilization*. Edited by Nathan Schlanger. New York: Berghahn Books, 2006, pp. 77-96.

3. Michael Taussig. “Transgression.” In *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Edited by Mark C. Taylor. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 349-364.

4. Taussig, p. 350

our acts within the game-context. As a consequence, these minor acts of transgression are often less intentional than spontaneous, punctuating and shaping our mundane experiences intermittently rather than holistically.

To explore moments of transgression in all their polysemic spontaneity, a study of game elements alone would seem to be lacking. Instead, pursuant to anthropological and cultural methods, a phenomenological approach may add a certain depth of description. Specifically, I explored a day of transgression within the gamified space created by the social media application *Foursquare* (2009).<sup>5</sup> This investigation of transgression in *Foursquare* is based on a typical day in 2012, reconstructed from data collected during long-term participant observation.

*Foursquare*, which rose to prominence in scholarship along with the term “gamification,” provides a “charged space”<sup>6</sup> for transgression in our everyday lives. At the time of this study, the program’s main transaction was the “check-in,” in which the application verifies and broadcasts a user’s location via GPS. *Foursquare* rewards the check-in with badges, points on a social leaderboard and prizes. This game-like activity sets ambiguous rules for its “players,” who could compete over either the virtual rewards, or their real world exploits—the types of venues they had checked-into, the frequency of places they checked into, etc.<sup>7</sup>

*Foursquare*’s user interface provides the first opportunity for transgression. A complicit act occurs between users, with the application acting as an intermediary. Friends are able to track the check-ins of those they follow online. Such surveillance might be impolitic, and yet during my study I casually monitored colleagues’ locations at least twice a day. I would never inform them of my routine spying, but occasionally would comment online on one of their interactions. At the same time, they were aware of their check-ins’ visibility, a kind of “active unknowing” or as Michael Taussig states, “they

5. More recently, the application has split itself in two, with the newer Swarm app focusing on check-ins and Foursquare becoming a reviewing application. See Alyson Shontell. “How Foursquare Made The Bold Decision To Split Its Product In Two, And How Both Apps Have Been Doing Since.” *Business Insider*, October 8, 2014. <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-swarm-and-foursquare-backstory-and-progress-2014-10>. Foursquare has also been the subject of protracted studies including personality types. Jordan Frith provides a taxonomy of user types, including “social users,” “gamers,” “explorers” and “cataloguers,” in Jordan Frith. “Communicating Through Location: The Understood Meaning of the Foursquare Check-In.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 19.4 (2014), pp. 890–905.

6. Taussig, p. 350

7. Maxwell Foxman. “How to Win Foursquare: Body and Space in a Gamified World.” In *Rethinking Gamification*. Edited by Mathias Fuchs, Sonia Fizek, Paolo Ruffino and Niklas Schrape. Lüneburg, DE: Meson Press, 2014, pp. 71 – 90.

know they must not know but in fact do ‘know’ a good deal.”<sup>8</sup> It is this “presence of a presence,”<sup>9</sup> as Taussig asserts, that has been coded into the program. Everyone was aware of the act, but the transgression occurred in a moment of “uncontrolled seeing.”<sup>10</sup> Only by commenting within the program could I transcend this passive secrecy. However, when I remarked on the movements of someone I barely knew, it verged on the unseemly. To mollify this possibility, *Foursquare’s* game-like interface situated my transgression within a diffused “magic circle,” rendering it harmless and acceptable fun. As Johan Huizinga suggests, “Inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count. We are different and do things differently.”<sup>11</sup> This act of surveillance, often criticized within the program, exemplifies a minor transgression that occurs when being compelled to act within the rules of the game.

How does a gamified application like *Foursquare* affect the everyday experience? In my own analysis, while roaming New York City, I highlighted a few moments when the game’s activity punctuated my life.

An obvious point of transgression that day surrounded the application’s primary mechanic — “checking-in” to venues. Although I did not have my phone, my primary tool for checking-in, I had learned ways to deceive the application. In the afternoon, using my computer, I retroactively checked-in to spots I had frequented earlier: the Murphy Institute in Midtown, along with a brief stop in Bryant Park in search of a Wi-Fi signal. That I spent only 30 seconds in the second venue and hours at the first was unimportant to the program in terms of point distribution. I was struck, as I am every time I “cheat” at *Foursquare*, by the nature of my transgression. Huizinga writes of cheaters:

*[T]he spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle.*<sup>12</sup>

Like “active unknowing,” a cheater must be conscious of the point of transgression in order to transgress it, and yet his awareness is a point of transgression in and of itself.

8. Taussig, p. 356

9. Taussig, p. 355

10. Taussig, p. 355

11. Johan Huizinga. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London, UK: Routledge, 1971, p. 12.

12. Huizinga, p. 11



My day was spent checking-in to a number of other venues. By the evening and my third coffee shop, my wife Gloria arrived, smartphone in hand. We headed to an intimate and slightly formal restaurant for dinner. Since Gloria does not participate in *Foursquare*, having no inclination to publicly disclose her location, I appropriated her phone to check-in while we waited for appetizers. Just as we finished a romantic meal, a friend arrived who had seen my check-in on *Foursquare*, breaking the spell of the moment, transgressing our privacy.

Our friend waited as we finished, and we three headed to a birthday party. Having not been out to a bar for some time, I felt out of place as my companions loudly conversed in crowded quarters. Many of these cohorts also used *Foursquare* and I saw through the program that they had all checked-in. I was unable to record my attendance as my wife's phone's reception in the back of the bar was poor. Taussig describes the body and image as "vehicles for the transgressive."<sup>13</sup> I felt my body pushing me toward the front of the bar, where cell reception would surely be better, each time conversation stalled. I glanced at my phone, plagued by my friend's check-ins, their collective presence excluding me online. Feeling disconnected, I walked away from the group to find a signal, so I might join them online – if not in person, then perhaps by checking-in to their venue. Transgressing my role in the social group, I found solace online. My wife and I departed shortly after.

Arriving at the subway station, it was nearing 11:20 PM. Despite the time, I intended to do work when I got home. However, we ran into another friend on the subway platform, and together got delayed on the train ride. It was long past midnight when we arrived at our stop. Since the opportunity to finish work had passed, we went to a nearby pub.

I was presented with a final dilemma: my friends in North Brooklyn were no doubt still partying, and I did not want them to know that I had stayed out. But I wanted/needed to check-in, particularly as I noticed a precipitous drop in my *Foursquare* rating, having been confined at home studying throughout the week. I finally decided to check-in illicitly, using the "off the radar" function of the program. This function blocked my friends from seeing the check-in, but yielded fewer points on the game's leaderboard. I recalled how I committed a similar deceit days earlier, taking advantage of faulty GPS to check into two places almost simultaneously to avoid suspicion that I was spending too much time out at one location, when I told my friends I was working. In both cases, I felt conflicted between a desire to engage with the program, to play its game, and the potential social ramifications. The points of transgression were

13. Taussig, p. 353

numerous and caused me varied levels of unease. In describing “uncontrolled seeing,”<sup>14</sup> Taussig mentions that “the secret (and hence the transgression that has to break through it) has in fact to be not only concealed, but revealed as well...in which transgression and taboo artfully play off one another in... an endlessly discharging circuit.”<sup>15</sup> Both serious and playful, I hid my deception, my secret, within the workings of the game. I was simultaneously aware of multiple transgressions: that of staying out late, and also of my desire to codify the experience. Ultimately, these motions are enmeshed within a feeling of dismemberment, where my own being has been transfigured by *Foursquare*, a sacrifice of myself to the logic of the game.

What I hope to highlight in this brief account is the paradox that surrounds *Foursquare*'s effect on my daily experience, along with the relation between a social body and gamified socialization. The game provides new opportunities to transgress, a set of rules I find ways to break. I subvert and challenge these rules for greater glory within the game. The simple activity of being where I am becomes a point of competition, punctuating my thoughts throughout the day. Desirous of winning, I am willing to manipulate the rules of the game as I see fit, surveilling friends and “cheating” my GPS in order to score points. *Foursquare* itself, by supporting such transgressions, in turn caused me to transgress my own quotidian practices—taking me away from friends at their birthday party and disturbing the intimacy of a dinner with my wife. These minor transgressions are at once cast aside, and yet perpetuate tiny moments of anxiety. A sense of doing wrong and the zeal of beating the system hang together in this transgressive moment. My experience of daily life offline becomes plagued by the question of whether I can “beat” *Foursquare*. Or is the game playing me? The game provides rules to live by and transgress, but never allows escape. When will I reach game over?

14. Taussig, p. 355

15. Taussig, p. 355



# Towards a Taxonomy of Sexy Analog Play

Ashley M. L. Brown

When I describe my research interest as “sexy games”, the most frequent response I encounter is looks of confusion and embarrassment. Whilst others can say, “I study MMOs” or perhaps, “I study tabletop games” and receive understanding nods or follow-up questions of interest, I frequently encounter misunderstandings of the types of games I study. What generally transpires next in such conversations is my long-winded and feeble attempt at explaining what precisely a “sexy game” is and how I go about studying it. I interpret my encounters with baffled peers and my own attempts at over-compensating explanations as a problem with language. Whilst we have words, names, and brands to associate with and describe forms of analog games (such as card games, board games, and folk games), and whilst we have the language to describe and discuss the content of those games (such as children’s, historical, or fantasy) we lack the language and categorization—even as game scholars and designers—to precisely name and discuss games centered on sexual content.

As a remedy for this lack of language, I endeavor here to develop a taxonomy for describing and discussing forms of analog play which involve sexy content. Whilst I think there is some use in keeping the umbrella term “sexy analog play” to cover all forms of non-digital play with a flirty or sexy connotation, it is better to investigate other, more specific words for use in describing precisely the types of play to be discussed. Whilst undoubtedly personally useful, the existence of such terminology has other applications as well. Namely, it would be useful to have words besides “adult” to describe analog games with sexual content from a marketing perspective. As a descriptor, “adult” board games can refer to difficulty level as well as content, which makes locating and purchasing sexual games difficult. To widen the existing vocabulary used to discuss sexual games, I have identified four broad categories drawn from a thematic analysis of existing literature in the fields of game studies, folk games, and game design, as well as contributing my own terms from my own research where I noticed a gap in the published literature. The four categories are: sexy brink play,<sup>1</sup> sexy board and card games, secret

1. Cindy Poremba. “Critical Potential on the Brink of the Magic Circle.” *Situated Play: Proceedings of the 2007 annual Digital Games Research Association Conference*. Tokyo: University of Tokyo, 2007. <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/07311.42117.pdf>

dress-up play,<sup>2</sup> and erotic role-play.<sup>3</sup> These four categories are by no means exclusive or final, but rather represent a starting point for fleshing out categories of sexy analog play.<sup>4</sup> Rather than consider this taxonomy as limiting what can or should count as sexy play, it is better to think of it as a first attempt at collating existing research with the goal of popularizing terminology for discussing and describing a wide variety of sexy games.

### *Sexy Brink Play*

The first of the categories of sexy analog play to be discussed is termed “brink play” by Cindy Poremba.<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that it has also occasionally been called forbidden play or forbidden games<sup>6</sup> in the past. Generally speaking, brink play makes reference to types of play which occur on the brink of social acceptability, or in some way push social norms and expectations. Although at its surface it may seem like all types of play—or all games—which invoke sexual themes or arousal may be considered sexy brink play, I assert that this is not the case. Some games which invite us to transgress social norms have become so ingrained in popular culture that they cease to invite players to the brink of acceptability. One such example might be a garter toss at a wedding. Although the act of a person crawling up another’s dress to retrieve an undergarment and then throw it to a group of friends is certainly an expression of intimacy in a demi-public setting, and thus could certainly be considered transgressive, it is the context of a wedding which normalizes this playful behavior. Whilst in other circumstances the individual components of a garter toss might be considered sexy brink play, it is the context of a wedding which pushes the activity away from the brink of social unacceptability and safely into the arms of convention. Therefore we might say that it is not the activity or game which

2. Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie, and Celia Pearce. “Playing Dress-Up: Costumes, Roleplay and Imagination.” Proceedings of Philosophy of Computer Games Conference 2007, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Emilia-Romagna, Italy, January 24–27, 2007; Kimberly A. Miller. “Gender Comparisons within Reenactment Costume: Theoretical Interpretations.” *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal* 27.1 (1998), pp. 35–61.

3. Ashley ML Brown. *Sexuality in Role-Playing Games*. London: Routledge, 2015.

4. For instance, while these initial four categories focus exclusively on games and games-oriented play, future contributions to this taxonomy could be terms relating to perennial gray areas, such as toys. For some writing on sexual toys, see Katriina Heljakka’s work.

5. Poremba, “Brink of the Magic Circle.”

6. Gonzalo Frasca. “Ephemeral Games: Is It Barbaric to Design Videogames after Auschwitz?” In *Cybertext Yearbook 2000*. Eds. Markku Eskelinen and Raine Koskimaa. University of Jyväskylä: Jyväskylä, Finland, 2000, pp. 172–180; Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003.

qualifies as brink play, but rather the socio-cultural contexts and conditions under which the playful behavior occurs which place it on the brink or not.

Likewise, not all brink play has a sexual component. Games which invite the player to take a controversial stance on an issue, or to play the villain, or to challenge racial or class definitions may be considered a type of brink play without involving sex. One example might be the cancelled Sweet Home Alabama Larp.

In terms of what *is* considered sexy brink play, the popular game *Twister*<sup>7</sup> is given as an example by Poremba in her 2007 DiGRA paper. Because the rules of the game use the players' bodies as game pieces to be moved around a board, or in this case the game mat, there are plenty of opportunities to transgress boundaries of social acceptability with regards to the body, touching, and general flirtation. In most Northern European and European-influenced North American cultural traditions, personal space demands that bodies of non-lovers must be conducted in such a way as to minimize unnecessary or accidental touching, as touching is usually reserved as a signifier of the most intimate relationships. As a game, *Twister* invites players to experience the sexy brink of social norms by encouraging the awkward positioning of bodies so that contact with other players becomes inevitable, as evidenced in the photo below.

In addition to the example of *Twister* I would add traditional, folk, and party games such as Pass the Orange, Spin the Bottle, Truth or Dare, or Seven Minutes in Heaven to the category of sexy brink play. Each of these games is played in flirtatious party atmospheres which encourage the transgression, or at least testing, of social norms. Because players are often grouped together at a social event or party during play, several inhibition-lowering factors are likely taking place during party games. Aside from a jovial atmosphere, other factors such as alcohol or drug consumption or social pressure may encourage a relaxation of social norms. In the traditional folk game Pass the Orange, for example, players hold an orange between their chin and shoulder and attempt to pass it to another player who must accept it between their chin and shoulder.<sup>8</sup> The rules of the game thus require players to nuzzle their faces and necks in an intimate way normally associated with cuddling or kissing. Whilst relatively tame, Pass the Orange provides some insight into how the rules of a game allow for an expression of intimacy normally reserved for partners to be expressed by acquaintances.

7. Charles F. Foley and Neil Rabens. *Twister*. [Physical game.] East Longmeadow, MA: Milton Bradley, 1966.

8. Ffion Mercer. *Handbook of Indoor Social Activities*. Photographic Teaching Materials: Buckingham, 1981.

*Sexy Board and Card Games*

The term “sexy board and card games”<sup>9</sup> refers to mass produced games with sexual themes. Such games are usually marketed to monogamous couples as a way to “spice up” their sex life. Although the picture below shows a popular pair of “sexy dice,” they would not fall within the category of “sexy board and card games” as I define it. Dice, spinners, and cards are usually included in most analog games, even non-sexy ones, as types of randomization mechanisms. I consider games to be more structurally complex than an isolated randomization mechanism, and thus “sexy board and card games” would not refer to a technique of randomizing which sexual act (verb) is paired with which body part (noun) for the purpose of forming a type of sexy, live-action Mad Lib. Therefore, not all board or card “games” which can be found in adult shops necessarily qualify to be included in this category as they do not qualify as games. They might instead be classified as toys, and therefore fall outside the remit of this short post, as noted in the introduction.

The board and card game format of sexy games, in particular, is what makes them an interesting avenue for study. There is something about the format and components of adult board and card games which invert the innocence of childhood games and become sexy, perhaps dangerously so, through the use of familiar, but inverted, objects. For example, the game *Domin8*<sup>10</sup> can be seen in my photo below. In some ways, *Domin8* can be thought of as a skin or modification of the game dominoes. Both games require players to match like symbols by placing tiles on a tabletop. *Domin8*, however, includes several sexy mini-games which involve touching other players which relate to which symbols are placed and in which order.

The above photo of sexy board and card games serves to illustrate the similarities in form between the games associated with children and those associated with sexual content. Although all the familiar cards, spinners and dice from childhood games are still there, one important point of departure is the color scheme. Bright primaries and pastels have been replaced with a darker palate which is perhaps indicative of the “after-dark” content within. It is interesting that although the games are nearly indistinguishable in form and mechanics, they differ greatly in thematic content.

9. This category is a term I coined whilst undertaking my current research project on “adult” board games. Rather than rely on the term “adult”, which often refers to a difficulty rating rather than a content rating, I choose instead to use the term “sexy” to highlight the fact the game has sexual content at its core.

10. *Domin8*. [Physical game.] Newark, Nottinghamshire, UK: Creative Conceptions LLC, 2013.



*Various sexy board games from the author's personal collection. Image used with permission by the author.*

### *Secret Dress-Up Play*

The next category of play to be discussed refers to costuming for the sake of sexual pleasure or sexual activity which usually involves some aspect of role-playing. It is important to note that the specific term of “secret dress-up play”, as it is used by Fron, Fullerton, et. al.,<sup>11</sup> differentiates itself from mere sexually suggestive costuming. Whilst some costumes worn for public celebrations such as Halloween, Carnival, or even cosplay at a fan convention may reveal sexualized parts of the body, be titillating, or suggest sexual functionality, they are worn in fact for the intention of social and public display. This by no means suggests that such costumes are never used for sexual purpose, as of course is occasionally the case with some wearers of fur-covered mascot costumes otherwise known as “furries” (pictured below). Rather, the word secret in this term refers to the practice of wearing costumes in private and for the explicit use of sexual fantasy.

11. Fron, Fullerton, et. al., “Playing Dress-Up.”





*Post-parade photo shoot at the furry convention Further Confusion 2007. Image by Laurence “GreenReaper” Parry, GFDL and CC BY-SA.*

Outfits for secret dress-up play can usually be purchased in lingerie shops, stores selling pornography and adult toys, or commissioned. The outfits are often organized thematically around a type of role-playing with occupational power relationships. For example, in the image below of an Ann Summers chain of lingerie shops in London, a red vinyl rendition of a nurse uniform can be seen. The nurse uniform allows for both an opportunity to role-play and introduces a power dynamic into sexual play involving the costume. Whilst wearing the costume, the nurse can take charge of a patient’s care regimen and/or follow a doctor’s orders. Rather than leather and lace which lack a theme, costumes such as the nurses outfit inspire, or at least hint at, a type of role-play with erotic content, which is the topic of the next section.

#### *Erotic Role-Play*

The final form of sexy analog play to be discussed is erotic role-play. Unlike the above-described “secret dress-up play”, erotic role-play may or may not include costuming or a live-action component, but does include taking on the role of a character and playing out sexual themes. Perhaps a key difference between erotic role-play and secret dress-up play is that erotic role-play happens in games rather than during free-form play. By this I mean that erotic role-play proceeds according to a set of rules which govern possible character actions and reactions involving sexual content, regardless of whether or not play happens in a field, around a table, in an online virtual world, or in a BDSM dungeon. Additionally, whether a player undertakes erotic role-play for sexual

gratification or arousal is likewise irrelevant. As a broad term, erotic role-play encompasses any role-playing activity which includes: erotic content, rules for character actions, and the taking on (or playing) the role of a character.

One interesting example of erotic role-play comes from tabletop gaming, a hobby which may seem at odds with stereotypical depictions of erotic and romantic settings. Unlike their online role-playing counterparts which contain beautiful vistas and fantastic worlds, offline role-playing games must rely on books to convey not only the rules for including sexual activities in play, but also imagination aids for sexual themes and content. *The Book of Erotic Fantasy*,<sup>12</sup> pictured below with dice accoutrement, is an example of the explicit inclusion of rules for sexual interaction between characters and even contains enhanced photographs of fantastical creatures. Both aspects of the book serve to assist with the inclusion of erotic themes in role-playing games.

Whilst the other types of sexy analog play discussed in this essay encompass physical action between *players* in the flesh, erotic role-play refers specifically to sexual actions which happen between *characters*. But often the lines between characters and players blur, especially in analog play where characters are represented by players' bodies. The types of sexual interaction between characters which happen in the flesh then—for example in a larp using the *Ars Amandi*<sup>13</sup> set of rules for simulating sexual interactions with hands—would also be fall under the aegis of erotic role-play.<sup>14</sup>

### Conclusions

Whilst the categories presented by this paper are by no means intended to be exhaustive, they represent a step toward creating a way to catalog and define all the interesting and creative ways people engage with sexuality through analog play. It is important to note that not all types of sexy analog play will be addressed by such a taxonomy and such exceptions are welcome. One notable exception which has arisen from writing this post is toys. An area for further development could be a focus on toy-oriented sexy analog play. However, important for the work at hand is the idea that current taxonomies

12. Gwendolyn F. M. Kestrel and Duncan Scott. *The Book of Erotic Fantasy*. China: Arthaus, Inc., 2006.

13. Emma Wieslander, E. (2004). "Rules of Engagement." In *Beyond Role and Play*. Edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros. Helsinki, Finland: Ropecon ry, 2004.

14. Also of interest here might be Jaakko Stenros's taxonomy of sex techniques in larps. Jaakko Stenros. "Amorous Bodies in Play: Sexuality in Nordic Live Action Role-Playing Games." In *Screw The System – Explorations of Spaces, Games and Politics through Sexuality and Technology*. Arse Elektronika Anthology #4. Edited by Johannes Grenzfurthner, Günther Friesinger, and Daniel Fabry. San Francisco: RE/Search & Monochrom, 2013.

in game scholarship have overlooked various types of sexy analog play as its own phenomenon. This is important because games which feature sexy analog play reveal that a game is not solely defined by either its form or its content, and that it can carry vastly different meanings depending on its socio-cultural context. This is particularly significant with sexy games, as they are sites where the activity of play, generally associated with children, intersects with the adult activity of sex.

# Playing with Portals: Rethinking Urban Play with Ingress

Kyle Moore

“The world around you is not what it seems,” lures the tagline for popular alternate-reality mobile game *Ingress*, which repurposes public landmarks into contested territory in a battle between two rival in-game factions.<sup>1</sup> Released in 2012 as an open-beta for Android devices, *Ingress* has now been downloaded 12 million times across both Android and Apple devices.<sup>2</sup> The game was developed by Niantic Labs, a former subsidiary of Google, and tasks players with territorializing their material environment through interaction with the mobile-based application. Using their mobile devices, players are equipped with a map of “portals”—user-submitted locations in the real world—and gameplay consists of engaging, capturing, and connecting these portals in order to control territory. Portals exist not only as nodes within a digital representation of the material space, but also as physical landmarks that bear sociocultural and material significance prior to their incorporation into the game.<sup>3</sup> I argue that within this type of mobile-mediated urban gaming, play is shaped by the player’s localized knowledge—how players learn to live within and move through space—as well as a sociocultural knowledge—social and cultural notions of what constitutes play within urban spaces. By focusing on portals as in-game elements with out-of-game materiality, this paper explores how players’ individual knowledge of the urban environment informs larger cultural notions of what constitutes play.

This paper suggests that, through portals, players are engaging in the practice of urban play. I adapt the term “urban play” from digital media scholars Adriana de Souza e Silva and Larissa Hjorth’s work on historically situated forms of urban playfulness.<sup>4</sup> I use the term to refer to a broad category of

1. [www.ingress.com](http://www.ingress.com), accessed November 8, 2015.

2. See the #IngressNews announcement published on Google+ on August 13, 2015: [plus.google.com/+Ingress/posts/GVvbYZzWyTT](https://plus.google.com/+Ingress/posts/GVvbYZzWyTT).

3. Such a connection between the material and the digital is a primary characteristic of alternate/augmented reality games. For instance, similar territorial practices take place in Ogmento’s Paranormal Activity: Sanctuary ([paranormalactivitythegame.com](http://paranormalactivitythegame.com)).

4. Adriana de Souza e Silva and Larissa Hjorth. “Playful Urban Spaces A Historical Approach to Mobile Games.” *Simulation & Gaming* 40.5 (2009), pp. 602–625.

activities that utilize the material structures of the urban environment in a playful manner. Such practices demonstrate a literacy of the urban environment while also blurring the boundaries between functional urban mobility and playful exploration, thus allowing for a rereading of the urban environment as a space in which to enact new, often subversive, forms of play. When playing *Ingress*, players perform prior local knowledge through their everyday practices of urban mobility, an articulation of understanding the urban environment as a series of navigable routes and material objects. But through the process of gameplay, this everyday urban mobility—from wandering back streets to taking public transport—becomes tied up in the practice of play, thus reshaping our understanding of the urban environment from a functionally navigable space into a series of potentially playable objects. For example, mundane forms of urban mobility, such as daily commutes to and from work, are transformed into playful practices by playing *Ingress*. I argue that by focusing on the use and expansion of local material knowledge,<sup>5</sup> we are able to challenge sociocultural notions of what constitutes play within urban environments. This paper firstly focuses on the role the material environment has in facilitating a player's knowledge of the urban environment, such as the role of historical landmarks and understanding patterns of navigation and transportation. I assert that these forms of localized knowledge form the primary basis of and situate the act of play within the urban environment. Secondly, this paper focuses on how "urban play" is a sociocultural construct that builds upon the player's understanding of the urban environment and the ways in which play challenges the social, material, and cultural conditions that frame the urban environment as a functional space. Finally, I conclude by tying both perspectives together in order to show how *Ingress* loosens the rigidity of material environments and transforms them into fluid, subversive spaces of play.

### *Entering Ingress: The Backstory*

*Ingress* has a complex narrative that underscores the practice of playing within material environments. The lore of the game states that in 2012, working alongside research into the Higgs boson at CERN in Geneva, Switzerland, a substance known as Exotic Matter (or XM) was discovered. Exotic Matter

5. Games researcher Shira Chess has also written about *Ingress* and argues that the game represents an intersection of regional and global communication and knowledge. (Shira Chess. "Augmented regionalism: *Ingress* as geomediated gaming narrative." *Information, Communication & Society* 17.9 (2014), pp. 1105–1117.) While the globalized social networks that contextualize the localized play of *Ingress* are an integral aspect of the game experience, for the purposes of this paper, I will be focusing my analysis on the specificity of local knowledge, both materially and socioculturally.

is believed to be associated with an unknown group of entities known as “Shapers”. In-game factions are divided based on their association with Shapers. The Enlightened (Green) wish to aid the Shapers’ infiltration of Earth, in the hopes of instigating an enlightenment. The Resistance (Blue), unsurprisingly, work towards defending humankind from any form of infiltration. The primary goal of the game is to form “control fields” through the linking of portals. Portals are located at public landmarks, and are surrounded on the game map by eight “resonators”—deployable in-game objects used to capture or upgrade portals. Game-play entails tapping portals on the map to open a list of possible actions and portal information. Alternatively, players can hold down on a portal via the in-game map (scanner) to quickly engage with it. Players “hack” portals using these modes of interaction, which give players the materials to either attack or deploy resonators. By linking three nearby portals, players can form a control field, which strengthens a faction’s control over that particular location by making it harder for the other team to destroy portals and gain dominance over specific locations.

Portals are submitted by players through the game’s interface and subjected to Niantic Lab’s portal review criteria.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, portals are not just present at large or historic landmarks. They have also been established at public murals, unauthorized street art, and a large number of informational displays. By placing portals at landmarks or points of public interest, players are actively drawing on their local knowledge. Additionally, the game’s guiding players to visible public landmarks may strengthen their knowledge of unfamiliar locations and aid them in navigating new environments. By focusing on players’ existing knowledge of urban environments, this paper suggests that urban play is best understood as a situated practice. Situated practice builds on existing sociocultural and material conditions that shape the urban environment and urban mobility. Situated practice is thus an integral attribute of *Ingress*, in which the game system is open to a range of emergent practices,<sup>7</sup> which are often articulations of the player’s specific localized knowledge of the environment coupled with a sociocultural understanding of the urban as a series of functional—or indeed subversive, as with street art—objects. This approach to urban play as a situated practice draws from the field of human-computer

6. See [support.ingress.com/hc/en-us/articles/207343987-Candidate-Portal-criteria](https://support.ingress.com/hc/en-us/articles/207343987-Candidate-Portal-criteria). As of September 2, 2015, new portal submissions are closed as Niantic reevaluates their portal submission processes.

7. In the field of game studies, Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton have written about emergent play as a dynamic and unexpected activity that is performed alongside the system of the game. Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton. "Game Analysis: Developing a Methodological Toolkit for the Qualitative Study of Games." *Game Studies* 6.1 (2009). [gamestudies.org/0601/articles/consalvo\\_dutton](http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/consalvo_dutton).

interaction and the concept of situated action—or in short, the means in which player’s knowledge expands the system of the game itself.

*A Situated Approach to Urban Play*

In developing a situated approach to urban play, this paper draws primarily on the vocabulary of Lucy Suchman and Paul Dourish. The term *situated* is adopted from the work of science and technology scholar Lucy Suchman, who uses the concept of *situated action* to understand the relationship between humans and technology.<sup>8</sup> The concept was developed as a counterpoint to the overarching focus the field of human-computer interaction has had on the material constraints of technology and the desired activities such constraints afford. Suchman asserts that such “planned” activities do not reflect the actual practice of engaging with technology. Rather, planned activities are in fact representations of situated actions, constructed in retrospect to engagement with the given technology. Applying Suchman’s concept to *Ingress*, the planned activities would be the goals and formalized rules of the game, or even the retrieval of data used to create Google Maps. However, the emergent behavior of players and the material constraints of the urban environment, alongside the unpredictability of the non-playing public, form a set of contextual circumstance which result in unique forms of play (situated actions) that build on the player’s subjective understanding of the urban environment and their lived experience within said environment.

Following from the work of Suchman, computer scientist Paul Dourish provides a detailed discourse analysis of the word “context” as it is used in the field of human-computer interaction.<sup>9</sup> Dourish notes that within this field, the term has dual origins as both a technical notion and one which draws analytic attention to certain aspects of social settings. Dourish suggests we turn attention away from *context*, as a set of descriptive features of settings, and focus instead on the idea of *practice*, as the forms of engagement with those settings. Drawing from the concept of situated learning and the work of educational theorist Etienne Wenger,<sup>10</sup> Dourish views practice not only as experiencing the world, but also as the means by which engagement is found to be meaningful.

8. Lucy A. Suchman. *Plans and Situated Actions: The Problem of Human-Machine Communication*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987, p. 35.

9. Paul Dourish. (2004). "What We Talk About when We Talk About Context." *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing* 8.1 (2004), pp. 19–30.

10. See Etienne Wenger. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.

Dourish's use of the concept of practice is one that unites action and meaning, a description of the world revealing itself as meaningful for particular forms of action. Following this view, playing *Ingress* is not only underscored by the material and sociocultural circumstances of the urban environment, but is also part of an active process of creating new forms of meaning with regards to these circumstances. As such, *Ingress* not only builds on the player's local knowledge, but also produces new forms of sociocultural knowledge through the process of re-framing certain actions as "play" rather than as functional urban mobility.

Playing *Ingress* requires an understanding of localized forms of navigation and what constitutes the urban space. The urban is made up of multiple material elements, which gain meaning through social and cultural interaction. Within the context of *Ingress*, large public landmarks, street art, informational displays, historical plaques and so forth are no longer only functional as forms of cultural heritage, understood primarily through a shared understanding of a location's past and present. Rather, these objects become potential portals, as users may submit any location for consideration to become an in-game portal. However, because Niantic stipulates that portals must contain historical or educational significance, players must possess a certain knowledge of local environments in order to know what specific objects may become portals. Through portal submissions and subsequent urban play, players of *Ingress* engage critically with what constitutes the urban by gaining an understanding of material objects and locations and their role within specific urban locations. Popular bus routes, dense urban environments, and locations with historical value or a high number of informational displays all become high traffic areas for playing *Ingress*. As such, players are able to articulate their engagement with the material environment and demonstrate an accumulation of local knowledge.

Certain locations become territorialized not only by the in-game map itself, but also by a shared understanding of player traffic. For instance, a location often visited by a group of high-ranking Resistance members quickly becomes difficult for Enlightened players to attack and overturn the territory. Through my own play sessions in Sydney, Australia, I observed that certain locations, such as busy transport routes and certain suburbs, would become continuously less contested in nature, becoming permanently constructed territories due to a high number of same-faction players moving through these locations, as players utilized their daily commutes and proximity to everyday locations as part of their playing strategy. Here, locations become deeply tied to player and faction identity, with certain suburbs being tied to factions, and certain high level players being tied to these suburbs. While this observation is not meant to denigrate the skill of such players, it is nonetheless important to



acknowledge how their embodied knowledge of such locations—that is, their lived interactions and familiarity with these locations—plays an important role in this process of territorial construction. With urban play, therefore, “skill” is less about the embodied and gestural literacy of engaging with input devices or building on existing gaming literacy from similar games or genres, and more about an articulation of a critical engagement with the urban environment, and a demonstration of understanding the urban environment as a series of material objects as well as systems of movement between said objects and locations.



*Sydney street art that is also an Ingress portal. Photo used with permission of the author.*

### *Playing with Portals*

For *Ingress* players, urban knowledge—or lack thereof—is articulated through engagement with portals. Players mediate their material environment and navigational practices through the use of the game’s built-in map system. Within this system, public landmarks or points of public interest are represented as color-coded nodes placed on a large map. Alongside this technological intervention in navigational practices, this engagement is primarily an articulation of embodied knowledge – the accumulation of knowledge through lived experiences and engagements with locations. Players build on their existing knowledge of urban environments gained through everyday engagements with these locations. Such a practice is similar to literacy researcher James Paul Gee’s discussion of playing video games as a form of situated learning whereby players contextualize their knowledge within the game itself.<sup>11</sup> For Gee, the practice of learning through play is based on players

probing and re-thinking their relationship with the game as a system. Players engage with the game with an initial hypothesis in mind, and in the course of gameplay respond to feedback and re-think any pre-given hypothesis based on the game's feedback. Such results are often then articulated through larger communities who work to achieve and legitimize a shared understanding of digital gaming systems and interactions with technologies. With forms of urban play such as *Ingress*, the player's hypothesis comes in the form of existing knowledge of material environments. By creating portals at minor landmarks such as information panels, or ephemeral landmarks like street art, players are able to expand not only their knowledge of local environments but also add to a shared sociocultural understanding of that location and of what constitutes urban play within these spaces. This results in sociocultural constructions of urban play tied to practices of being in and moving through the city, and of everyday urban mobility and local knowledge as the primarily basis for all forms of playful interaction with urban environments.

Social communication, both within in-game communication channels and out-of-game social networking services, provides a platform for understanding how the material environment shapes the practice of urban play. While many strategies, suggestions, and large-scale in-game actions may be coordinated through social networking platforms, the material environment itself plays an important role in shaping the practice of urban play. The practice of playing within urban environments has been described by de Souza e Silva and Hjorth as simultaneously transformative and inherent.<sup>12</sup> Transformative in that the urban environment and the material objects within said space are repurposed, and inherent in that such material objects come with the potential to be played. Such a conceptualization suggests similarities between the urban environment and a game board, where the material affordances of the game space inform and restrict the potential movements of the players. Here, our understanding of play is shaped by the afforded structure of the space: urban play is not only subjected to the encoded rules of the game, but also to the sociocultural construction of what we consider to be appropriate behavior within these public spaces. Increasingly, urban play becomes less about energetic sports like parkour or skateboarding, and more about the intersection between the mobile device, software, and the material environments. Significantly, this results in urban play becoming less conspicuous, as the gestures of players now fail to signal to non-

11. James Paul Gee. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. 2nd ed. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2007.

12. De Souza e Silva and Hjorth, 2009.



*Engaging with portals at the Sydney Opera House. Photo by Connie Wong, and used with permission of the author.*

players that play is taking place. This can produce moments of transgressive play, as locations deemed as appropriate for play based on their inclusion in the game's intel map may be considered inappropriate within their sociocultural contexts. Places of historical or religious value may fit the portal criteria for *Ingress*, but may fail to take into account the historical specificity or cultural significance of such locations.<sup>13</sup>

13. The most notable example of such was the approval of portals at former concentration camps across Europe – an act former parent company Google has since apologised for. See Matt Kamen, M. "Google Apologises for Nazi Camps in AR Game Ingress." *Wired UK* July 3, 2015. [www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2015-07/03/google-ingress-apology-for-concentration-camp](http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2015-07/03/google-ingress-apology-for-concentration-camp).

Within the urban environment, as with all play, the activity is in part afforded by the materiality of the environment. As the playground affords certain types of playful activities, so too do the streets of the city. For play scholar Miguel Sicart the metaphor of the playground allows for an exploration of play as a creative activity able to move beyond the design of the material space.<sup>14</sup> To view the city as a playground, rather than as a game space, is to view it as potentially open to playful activities. As the Situationist International performed their practice of *dérive* to subvert the structure of the city through aimless wandering, urban play suggests a type of subversion of urban mobility.<sup>15</sup> This tension is generated through the perceived functionality of the city, primarily as a site of commerce. Those who can afford leisure time are able to play with these perceptions, establishing a link between urban play and class. The city itself may be deemed a potentially or inherently playful site, but the question is for whom is that the case? Game designer Mary Flanagan explores further the practice of the *dérive* through her own vocabulary of wandering and drifting.<sup>16</sup> She compares those who wander as a form of artistic expression and subversion of the capitalistic structures of the urban, and those who drift out of obligation due to their social and economic disempowerment. In regards to this, those who play *Ingress* are articulating their economic and social power, their ability to engage in leisure time and freely wander the urban environment, and the power to subvert, transform, and re-contextualize material objects for the sake of play. With this, the notion of what constitutes urban play becomes deeply tied to who has the ability to play within these spaces, and under what terms.

Similar to that of a board game, players' engagement with the space may become emergent, dynamic, and unpredictable, and may be subject to a local formulation of rules, similar to the "house rules" common in board games. These are sociocultural negotiations with the player's material environment and the possibilities afforded to players within the proximate space in which play is conducted. There is, to some extent, a possibility for movement, but only movements that are physically afforded to players by the material environment. Players may submit portals to the game's admin, but portals require a material anchoring. Similarly, players must perform play within physical proximity of the portal itself. Navigating these material constraints ties directly to existing

14. Miguel Sicart. *Play Matters*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014.

15. Guy Debord. "Theory of the *Dérive*." *Les Lèvres Nues* 9 (1956). [www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html](http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html).

16. Mary Flanagan. "Locating Play and Politics: Real World Games & Activism." *Proceedings of the Digital Arts and Culture Conference*. Perth, Australia, 2007.

sets of local knowledge and a desire to further explore urban environments. While the sociocultural aspects to urban play—the how and why we play in cities—is an important element in understanding games such as *Ingress*, it is possible to argue that the materiality of these play spaces has significant impact on the reasons for and the means by which individuals and groups play. For instance, there is a clear disparity between urban, suburban, and rural *Ingress* players. The urban, with high density of potential portals and higher flows of potential players passing through these dense areas, results in highly contested in-game territories. Alongside this, transport infrastructure plays an important role in facilitating highly contested zones within urban environments. Those who travel on such routes to and from central urban locations form the basis of a playing elite, whose flexibility in work allows for increased access to technology and potential play time. While knowledge of material environments forms a key basis to play, access to these material infrastructures also plays an important role in facilitating urban play.

### *Conclusion*

Ultimately, *Ingress* re-purposes objects within the urban environment, objects which feature in players' everyday embodied local knowledge. Situated between regional bodies of knowledge and the creation of a global networked map of public landmarks, players embody the practice of urban navigation through their engagement with and navigation between key public landmarks. By engaging with portals located at public landmarks, players participate in the situated practice of play. That is, they participate in established sociocultural and material practices common with navigating urban environments, while simultaneously creating new meanings for these locations, such as the strategic importance of certain locations and landmarks. The material environment comes with an embedded narrative, one established by institutional or government regulations of public places and articulated through histories of locations, through tourism, and through lived experiences of communities. *Ingress* plays with these sociocultural circumstance, as well as the material circumstance that give shape to the material environment as a space of play. Shared understandings of these spaces, either through online or local communities, are then reframed through engagement with portals. The significance of these landmarks, as local historical or cultural significance, is recontextualized and given new significance within the context of *Ingress*. While playing *Ingress* may indeed recontextualize this knowledge, the practice of playing is also deeply shaped by material and sociocultural circumstance of



*Playing Ingress at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. Photo by Connie Wong, and used with permission of the author.*

local environments. Furthermore, what constitutes play becomes challenged by these material conditions. Everyday forms of urban mobility—navigation, commuting, wandering, and exploring—all become valuable forms of play and allow for a rich and complex playful practices. What is at stake in *Ingress* is not just a blurring of boundaries between play and non-play, but a more robust understanding of what may be considered play.



# The Pleasures of Adaptation in Ryan North's *To Be or Not to Be*

Emma Leigh Waldron

“Games don’t matter,” declares Miguel Sicart provocatively in his newest book, *Play Matters*.<sup>1</sup> What is more important, he claims, is play. Games are merely one of many forms of play, but play itself is not tied to any one object or activity. It is something much bigger; it is a way of being in the world. Of the several attributes of play that Sicart details in the introductory chapter of his book, the most salient for me is the fundamental connection between play and pleasure. Connecting play with pleasure allows analysis to shift from the cerebral, structural, and technical content of games to the heart of why we play games to begin with. To pursue pleasure is to loosen the knots of hegemonic discourse. In order to more deeply explore the relationship between play and pleasure, I will theorize adaptation as a mode of play. In order to do this, I use Ryan North’s *To Be or Not To Be: A Chooseable-Path Adventure* as a case study.

Locating play in the precarity of the carnivalesque, Sicart describes play as existing in constant tension “between the rational pleasures of order and creation and the sweeping euphoria of destruction and rebirth.”<sup>2</sup> I believe that such tension can be exemplified, if not epitomized, by the practice of adaptation. As Linda Hutcheon has noted, one of the pleasures of experiencing an “adaptation as adaptation” is the “knowing” reader’s “conceptual flipping back and forth between the work we know and the work we are experiencing.”<sup>3</sup> While both knowing and unknowing audiences will get pleasure out of a (good) adaptation, there is something affectively productive that occurs in the knowing reader’s encounter with *To Be or Not To Be*.<sup>4</sup> By engaging the particular format of ergodic—or structurally non-linear—literature, North shows how the inherent tensions in cybertextual negotiations mimic the

1. Miguel Sicart. *Play Matters*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014, p. 2.

2. Sicart, p. 9.

3. Linda Hutcheon. *A Theory of Adaptation*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, [2006] 2013, p. 139.

4. My sentiments closely echo those of Julie Sanders, who also locates the pleasure in this intersection: “It is this inherent sense of play, produced in part by the activation of our informed sense of similarity and difference between the texts being invoked, and the connected interplay of expectation and surprise, that for me lies at the heart of the experience of adaptation and appropriation” Julie Sanders. *Adaptation and Appropriation*. London: Routledge, 2006, p. 25.



tensions at play in adaptation. Here, North not only plays with *Hamlet*, but provides a means for the reader to do so as well.

*Reading the Game / Playing the Book*

In the opening pages of *To Be or Not To Be*, North fictionally situates his own book as historically contemporaneous with Shakespeare, and celebrates it as “the earliest recorded example of ‘the books as game’ genre.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, from the beginning, North’s project clearly presents itself as more than a book; it is also a game. The reader, then, is more than a reader; they are also a player.

Since *To Be or Not To Be* is a game, then playing it consists of the following four rules:

- 1) *Start reading from page 1.*<sup>6</sup>
- 2) *When you get to the bottom of the page, choose one of the options provided.*
- 3) *Flip to the page that corresponds to that choice and continue reading.*
- 4) *Repeat steps 2 through 3 until you get to an ending.*

All of these rules are either implicit or intuitive, but they bear saying because failure to adhere to any of these rules will break the game, or to be more specific, will break the narrative. For instance, following the rules in order is important, since if a reader tries to start the book anywhere other than at the beginning, while they may be able to follow steps 2–4 without a problem, their story will lack a traditional expository beginning. Similarly, if the reader skips step number 3 and simply continues reading the pages in numerical order, or turns to a page other than the one that matches the choice they’ve made, the story will not make any narrative sense. The reader is free to break the rules in any way they wish to, and may indeed gain pleasure or meaning from doing so. But such transgressions break the game as they ignore how North has adapted *Hamlet* from a traditional narrative arc.

In fact, if a reader *does* try to ignore the rules of the game and read straight through the book in order, they immediately receive a slap on the wrist from the voice of North/the game:

5. Ryan North. *To Be or Not To Be: A Chooseable-Path Adventure*. Breadpig, 2013, p. 0. (The very first page of the book is not numbered; pagination begins on the page following the one that this quote is from.)

6. Or, technically, page 0. (See Note 5.)

*Whoah, whoah, slow down there, cowboy! At the end of that last bit, you were supposed to make a choice, and then jump to the page that reflects that choice. Instead of following those instructions, you just kept reading what came next like this is an ordinary book! THIS BOOK IS CRAZY INSANE; HOW ARE YOU EVEN ACTING LIKE THIS IS AN ORDINARY BOOK??*<sup>7</sup>

The reader thus immediately encounters tension between their own control of the story and the control of the author. Although the entire premise of the book is that the reader is permitted to make meaningful choices that will lead them through relevant storylines, the recurrence of North's authoritative authorial voice reminds the reader of the futility of their choices, since North can, at any time, divert the track the character is on if he does not approve of their choices. This point is also evident in the game-like representation of the book, but significantly, as an absurd and possibly broken game. North's frequent references to character stats and point values,<sup>8</sup> ultimately have no significance whatsoever, as there is not only no means of tracking such information, but there is also no means of using such aspects during gameplay.

If rules 1-3 are important, then rule 4—playing through to an ending—is essential. That is to say, if the reader simply stops reading at an arbitrary point, then their story will not have an ending. This is significant in that it represents narrative resolution as a game goal. The “win condition” thus serves as incentive for the player to play multiple times and to make particular choices in an effort to arrive at a particular ending. Which ending(s) is of course up to the individual player and largely contingent upon their individual play style: do you want your character to die? To get married? Do you want to find your way through the labyrinthine structure in order to arrive at as many endings as possible?<sup>9</sup>

Of course, the game blocks certain attempts at circumnavigating the system by not providing a way to trace *backwards* from any page. Also, if a reader flips directly to the last page of the book, North's voice taunts again, “Hah hah, nice try champ! Opening the book to the last page to see how the story ends isn't gonna help you out with this little volume of non-linear

7. North, p. 3.

8. The reader who encounters the above passage is then told, “your final score is ‘maybe learn to read books better sometime’ out of 1000”. North, p. 3.

9. The book features numerous full-color illustrations by 65 artists, a feature that was one of the main selling-points of the project. However, these illustrations only accompany endings, so it is in the reader's best interests to “play to the end” in order to reach the reward of one of the illustrations.

branching narrative structure!!”<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that someone can’t “cheat” by simply flipping through the book and just looking for all of the readily identifiable endings, but the endings themselves as end goal reward are by no means the only incentive for the player to play the game. Rather, the *pleasure* of finally arriving at one of those endings is derived from both the experience of *play* as well as from reading through the full story arc that gets them there *as an adaptation* of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

The negotiation that thus occurs throughout the game between the player and North is what makes this ergodic text specifically a cybertext, by Espen Aarseth’s definition.<sup>11</sup> I would argue that these moments of negotiation are what make cybertexts pleasurable, and by reflexively and deliberately exacerbating these moments, North pumps up the volume of that pleasure. After all, the stakes are high: “Trying to know a cybertext is an investment of personal improvisation that can result in either intimacy or failure.”<sup>12</sup> Since tension and precarity are central to Sicart’s theory of play, it follows that it is precisely in that tension—the possibility of achieving *either* intimacy *or* failure—that pleasure is rooted. For the knowing reader of *To Be or Not To Be*, the pleasure is the result of the dangling carrot of the possibility of wresting the text away from Shakespeare and its perpetual elusivity as North takes it back again. Because ultimately, after all is said and done, it is merely an illusion that the reader has any control at all: this is North’s game.

#### *Whose story is it?*

Significantly, North does not shy away from his authorial power. Rather, he revels in it.

In the first sentence of the book North outs Shakespeare as a plagiarist, and suggests that “the famed play *William Shakespeare Presents: Hamlet!* was lifted wholesale from the volume you are about to enjoy, *To Be or Not To Be*.” Following from this point, North lays bare the fact that the player’s interactivity with the text is inherently impotent, and actually provides the choice to *not* choose your own narrative path and follow instead “the choices Shakespeare himself made when he plagiarized this book back in olden times.”<sup>13</sup> This path is designated by “tiny Yorick skulls” near the bottom of the page where the

10. North, p. 740.

11. Espen J. Aarseth. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997, pp. 126–127.

12. Aarseth, p. 4.

13. North, p. 1.

choice is offered. After selecting a character, interested players can read straight through the book on autopilot. This results in a “straightforward” adaptation of *Hamlet*, as written by Ryan North, with minimal interactivity on the part of the reader. But of course, even these storylines are by no means straightforward. Ophelia and “Hamlet Sr.,” for example, do not get very far.

If a reader attempts to play this way as Ophelia, they will find the choices presented are far from neutral; after Laertes and Polonius offer her condescending advice about her relationship with Hamlet and call her slutty and dumb,<sup>14</sup> Ophelia is eventually offered the choice to either “Slap [Polonius] across his face and tell him you’re not dumb and you can recognize sincere emotion in a sexual partner when you see it”, or to:

*Tell him – you’ll obey? And then call him your lord. And...follow him meekly out of the room? Agree with everything he and Laertes have said, because all that stuff I wrote earlier about you being an independent woman in charge of her own destiny sounds PRETTY DUMB ACTUALLY, and you’d better do whatever someone else tells you to, because anyone other than you probably knows better about your own life than you do, right? Look, I am now trying to think of the dumbest thing you can do. Please, I beg you, do not choose this option.*<sup>15</sup>

If the reader follows the second option (the one with the Yorick skull), they are told that they are no longer allowed to be Ophelia, and are given only one option: to continue playing as Hamlet.

But Hamlet is by no means immune to criticism from North either. Although Ophelia and Hamlet Sr. may not have particularly long lifespans in the “Shakespearean” choice tree, Hamlet is constantly berated for following the “original” choices.<sup>16</sup> For example, after the infamous “get thee to a nunnery” scene, Ophelia asks Hamlet why he is making such cruel and sexist comments, and North chimes in to say he thinks it is a pretty good question. If Hamlet then

14. North’s contemporary, colloquial, and irreverent language leaves no room for nuanced interpretations of Shakespeare’s dialogue here.

15. North, p. 550.

16. The majority of the book, of course, is open-ended options leading to an incredibly large array of possible plodlines and endings. Ophelia is given the option to disobey her father, express her independence, and study science, and Hamlet is given the option to be less emotionally manipulative with those he loves and to take decisive action. Hamlet Sr., unfortunately, is really the only one who gets the short end of the stick as he does not get the option to avoid being murdered by Claudius, and if he becomes a ghost, he isn’t even given the option to haunt Hamlet as happens in the original play.

proceeds to make the “Shakespearean” choice to “Say ‘Women are idiots who just want to get a sexing,’”<sup>17</sup> on the following page North almost audibly sighs and shakes his head as he remarks, “Sometimes I wonder why I give you these choices.”<sup>18</sup>

North at no point pretends to be invisible, and in doing so, highlights the frustrating moments of negotiation in his cybertext. Here, the process of storytelling is clearly understood to be collaborative, but in tension as such. The tension between North and the reader intersects with the tension between North and Shakespeare. That is to say, adaptation, as a mode of play, is carnivalesque in that it epitomizes “a dance between creation and destruction, between creativity and nihilism.”<sup>19</sup> Alongside North, the reader participates in a tug-of-war between destroying Shakespeare and building something new.

### *Pleasurable Precarity*

For the “knowing” Shakespeare enthusiast, the pleasure of *To Be or Not To Be* resides in the remaking of *Hamlet* in a mode that expresses criticism of its sexist themes, obnoxiously immature protagonist, unrealistic plot points,<sup>20</sup> and plain boringness.<sup>21</sup> The cultural icon of Shakespeare, so often held up as sacred and untouchable, may be examined and critiqued *through* play. Here, adaptation (as a mode of play) “takes control of the [“work”] and gives it to the [player] for them to explore, challenge, or subvert.”<sup>22</sup> The gamebook structure draws the reader into a collaborative and participatory mode of adaptation that emphasizes that Shakespeare is *not* beyond all criticism.

But, of course, neither is North. In fact, *To Be or Not To Be* is a prime example of the impossibility of “truly” interactive text, since the finite options from which the reader/player has to choose are still designed by the author/designer. For instance, in the scene quoted above where Ophelia is chided for letting her father and brother make her life choices for her, although it ostensibly offers a feminist reclaiming of Ophelia, is not completely free of problematic elements. Not all women are equally empowered to make choices such as this, and it is therefore unethical and harmful to place blame on the victim. But on the other hand, in this space North speaks to the reader,

17. North, p. 90.

18. North, p. 333.

19. Sicart, p. 3.

20. The possibility that poison administered through the ear could really kill someone is frequently called into question throughout the book.

21. Hamlet is often teased for his failure to take action.

22. Sicart, p. 4.

rather than to Ophelia, emphasizing, at the very least, that making the choices that Ophelia was originally given *by Shakespeare* do not lead to a particularly thrilling storyline for Ophelia.<sup>23</sup>

But what North does particularly well, and what is unique about this text, is his deliberate and irreverent engagement with those tensions. Incidentally, it is precisely this tension that serves to reify the original “work” that is Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, according to Shakespearean scholar Margaret Jane Kidnie. For her, authenticity is not an essential and inherent trait in the author’s mind or a singular text, but is rather defined by a networked group of users *through* the process of designating all those things that are *adaptations*.<sup>24</sup> These two designations are flexible, therefore, and contingent upon temporal, geographical, and social contexts. Playing through adaptation allows us to straddle this pleasurable line between “work” and “adaptation”, and to resist a bourgeois ideology of taste that insists that only certain works count as legitimate.

23. To be fair, it should also be noted that Hamlet, too, is forced to play as Ophelia for a while when his storyline gets too boring.

24. Margaret Jane Kidnie. *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge, 2008.



# Interviews





# Currency: An Interview with Chris Wille and Brian Patrick Franklin

James A. Hodges

*Currency* (2014), by Chris Wille and Brian Patrick Franklin, uses an antique Burroughs adding machine to control player movement on a constantly-printing roll of receipt paper. Players traverse levels generated by real-time Bitcoin exchange rates. Developer Chris Wille describes the project as “an ASCII generated 8 BIT game”<sup>1</sup> modeled after Atari’s classic *Defender* (1981). But *Currency* throws players into a map generated by live financial information, not by some developer’s omnipotent hand. Everything about *Currency* challenges our commonsense classification of games as either “digital” or “analog,” from its paper display to its antique controller.

Linking analog computing technology (the adding machine) with digital networks (global financial systems), *Currency* places old and new technology in conversation with the player’s physical body. The tactile pleasures of cranking commands through a Burroughs machine remind us that lines between digital and analog gaming are socially constructed, historically contingent, and never completely stable. We are reminded that analog networks of mail, radio, and telephone communication linked global financial systems together long before digitization and information theory took command. The distinctions between computer, electronic, digital, and tabletop gaming become uncertain, emphasizing the need for more specific language in our classification of various games.

In keeping with the theme of pushing game studies beyond the analog/digital divide, I asked Chris and Brian a few questions about their work. Since *Currency* pushes the notion of an 8-bit game beyond our typical computer-controller-display conventions, I wanted to ask the developers for a deeper sense of their understanding of gaming beyond the digital.

**James A. Hodges:** *Currency* uses economic machinery from a variety of eras – an adding machine from the early 20th century, a more contemporary receipt printer, and a digital link with cryptocurrency exchanges. The game brings together artifacts from before the Gold Standard, from

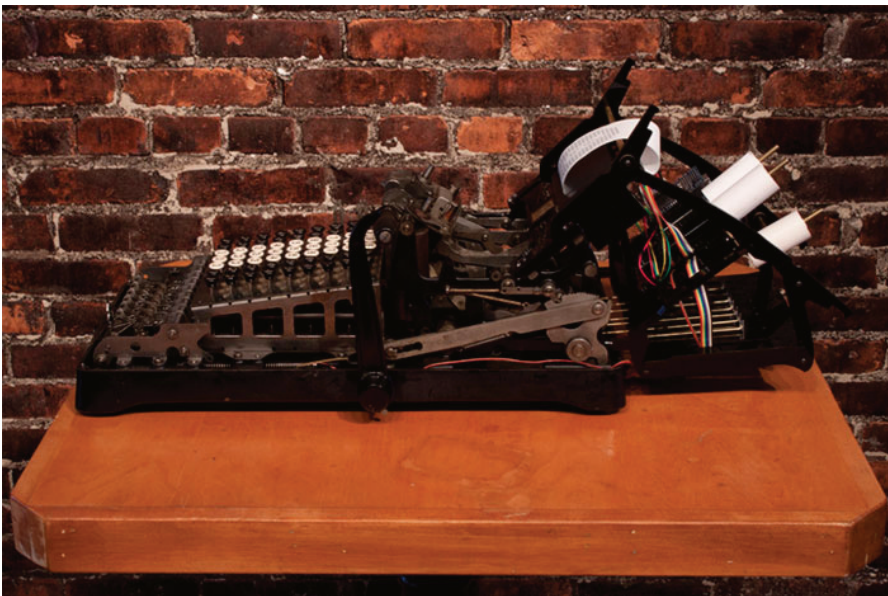
1. <http://chriswille.com/currency.html>

material currency to relational currency. What do you see *Currency* telling us about the relationship between analog and digital machinery?

**Brian Patrick Franklin and Chris Wille:** We find the analog-to-digital relationship particularly interesting because it directly relates to the way in which we all use money today. We trust that the numbers we see on our banks' websites have value, just like we have trust in the bills we hand someone, and just like we have trust in a bar of gold sitting in a reserve. While there is a nostalgic or emotional response to the physical pieces of paper and metal we hold in our hand, there is little difference between that and the 1's and 0's that automatically pay our gas bills each month.

Value exists in these items because we have collectively decided that it does, not due to a notion of intrinsic worth. While this is certainly not a new idea and far from a revolutionary statement, we're fascinated by the way the existence of Bitcoin itself so plainly calls out this construct of worth. The very premise of the currency is that it will have value if enough people agree that it should; a conversation that occurs every time something new is used to barter, be it Bitcoins, paper money, Disney Dollars, or gold.

The digital extensions applied to the analog machinery in *Currency* are meant to call up these relationships between analog and digital currency and how we apply a sense of value to each.



*Currency, viewed from the side. Photo from developers' websites.*

**JH:** You mention on your website that *Currency's* use of receipt printing references the early stock exchange, and that Bitcoin-generated visual output is used as a “foil” to this decidedly analog technology. Can you elaborate a bit more on what qualities are accentuated by the foil-like relationship between old and new economic technologies?

**BPF & CW:** In our eyes, the most intriguing quality that is highlighted is the perspective of an economy as built by the modern DIY culture. Bitcoin stands in stark contrast to any official stock exchange with its crowd-regulated structure. While stock exchanges are centralized, often deriving their name from their location (i.e., New York Stock Exchange, London Stock Exchange, Hong Kong Stock Exchange, SIX Swiss Exchange, etc.), Bitcoin is completely decentralized. This decentralization – combined with a 24-hour trading window – makes Bitcoin a truly global endeavor, ignoring borders and cultural delineations. It is an equalizer. Authority is taken out of the hands of a government and relies on its users for regulation.

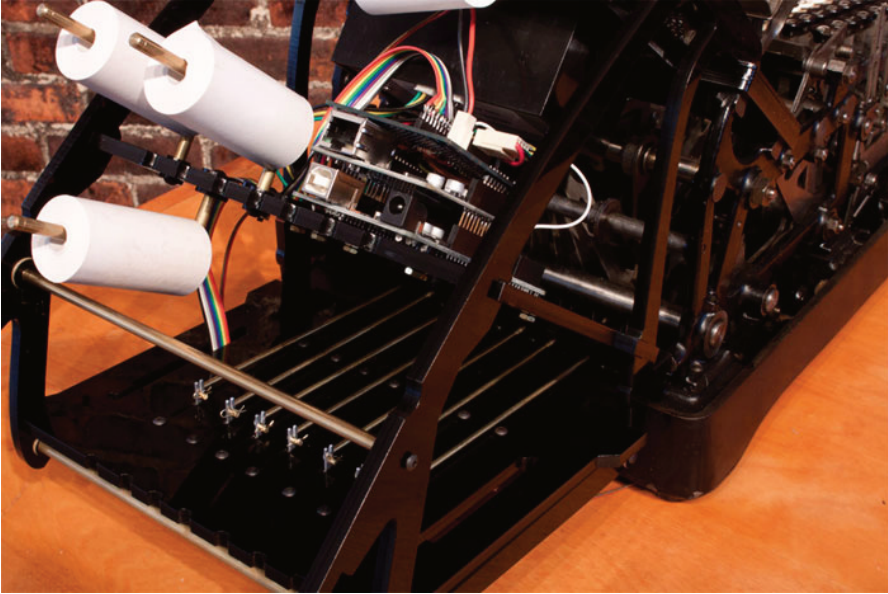
**JH:** *Currency's* combination of analog and digital computing techniques brings financial systems from multiple eras together in a kind of playful anachronism. Steampunk aesthetics that make similar kinds of connection have been growing in popularity over the past few years as well. How do you see currency relating with themes of anachronism and steampunk?

**BPF & CW:** Anachronistic themes permeate *Currency*. An adding machine feeds player input to an Arduino microcontroller. The Arduino is reconciling mechanical input with the digital information it gathers from its network. And, most playful, the complex calculations and processes within the modern Arduino chip are visualized as simple abstract shapes reminiscent of 8-bit tiles on a physical strip of paper.

In blending these eras, we don't try to hide the contemporary technology at use in *Currency*. Instead we are quite honest with where one technology ends and another begins, letting each take ownership of their purpose within the overall functionality of the system. The mechanical parts are blatantly mechanical and the digital parts are blatantly digital. It's the intersections of these elements that we find to be one of the most engaging aspects of the work.

While the extreme mechanical complexity of the adding machine leads people toward steampunk parallels, the comparison breaks down with the overt plastic structure and electronic inclusions of a microcontroller, sensors, and the wires that run between them.

**JH:** All of our talk about *Currency's* commentary on computing and finance would be meaningless if the game didn't receive input from a human player,



*Currency, viewed from the rear. Photo from developers' websites.*

with a physical body in physical space. How do players relate with the physical elements of *Currency*? How is *Currency*'s relation with physical space similar or different from other games you've worked on?

**BPF & CW:** Part of *Currency*'s draw to players is the wonderful tactile sensation of the game console. The mechanical buttons respond to the player's finger with a click that is unique to such a heavy mechanism. The arm that the player pulls down at the end of each turn produces an immensely satisfying ratcheting "ka-chunk."

The receipt paper that provides the visual feedback is also a vital piece of the game's physical experience. At the end of each game, the players tear off and take with them the length of receipt paper that holds their gameplay. Not only does this action leave players with a physical document of their experience, a receipt of their transaction with the game, but it points toward the external aspects of the systems behind the game. The same numbers that were influencing a specific round of this game are influencing the purchase of countless and unknowable items. This abstract Bitcoin data turns into physical property that affects the lives of people all across the globe.

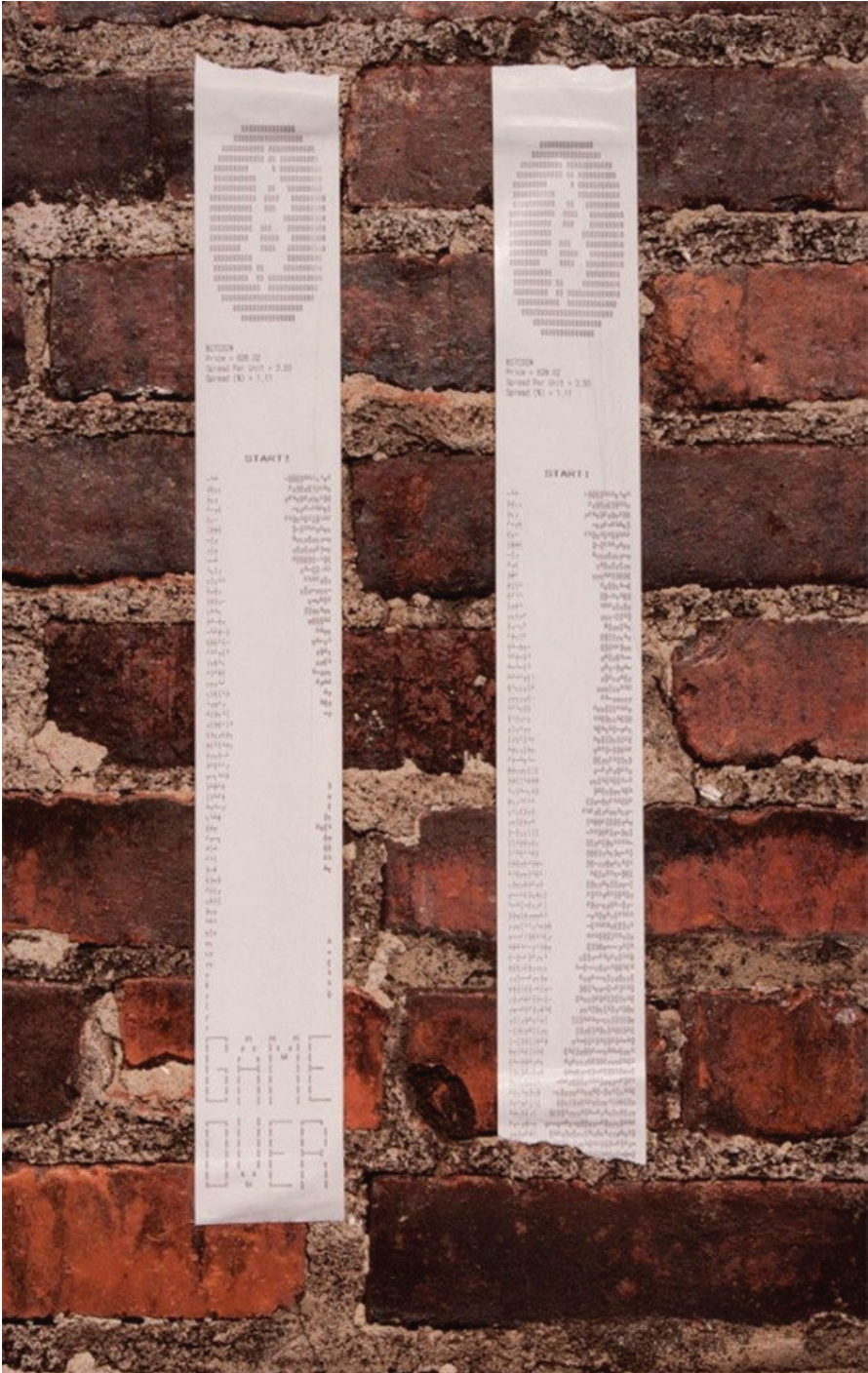
**JH:** How does *Currency* fit within the classification schemes that we commonly use for games? Categories like "digital" and "analog" seem too narrow for a game like this. Talk of "electronic" games could sidestep this

issue, but some of *Currency's* most pleasing elements come from its decidedly mechanical components. Since this issue of *Analog Game Studies* is all about breaking down the analog/digital division, what are your thoughts on the topic?

**BPF & CW:** *Currency* is a tough game to categorize. It's not played on a screen or monitor. It has elements that are controlled by mechanical gears and levers and elements that are controlled circuit boards. Up to this point we've definitely had the luxury of skirting the issue by calling it whatever seemed appropriate at the time, usually "video game" or "electronic game." Video game, however, is probably the most accurate classification for it, although it is a video game with no traditional video or screen.

*Currency* shares a lot with the old Tiger handheld video games from the late 1980s. While they are thought of as video games, the monitors on these game systems were, in fact, simple LCD screens that displayed the action very slowly. The receipt paper that holds the gameplay for *Currency* could be considered an even slower video display, updating but not overwriting its frame once every few seconds. Yet, if sped up like a flipbook, it would display fluid animation of the level imagery.





*Currency, viewed from the rear. Photo from developers' websites.*





# Inspiration and RPG Design: An Interview with Nathan D. Paoletta

Evan Torner

*“Try to play with people outside your usual circles and pay attention to when the game is pushing them to do things that are “in-genre” whether they knew about it beforehand or not.”*

Indie role-playing game design, or the self-publication of RPGs by creators who retain rights to their own work, has become an integral part of the contemporary role-playing landscape. Games such as *Breaking the Ice* (2005), *Fate* (2003, 2013), and *Dungeon World* (2012) are now regular staples at conventions and around the dinner table. And whereas the indie board game community has gathered around sites such as Board Game Geek and Board Game Jam, the indie RPG design community has congregated on platforms including Story Games, Gaming as Women, Google+, and the now-dormant Forge website.

A self-proclaimed Forge alumnus and “game, graphics and objects designer and fabricator,” Nathan D. Paoletta has been resolutely pushing the boundaries of indie RPG design into barely charted territory for the last nine years. Hailing from New Mexico and currently based out of Chicago, Paoletta creates artisanal RPGs that, on an aesthetic level, are remarkably in tune with the feel of the original source material. His work stands out in an increasingly well-populated field of RPG designs, including his recent release *World Wide Wrestling* (2015).

Here I wanted to talk a little bit more about the different forms of fiction and design that inspire him, and how that affects RPG design. Given a post-Forge environment, I actually wish to *preserve* some of the jargon from that forum that still structures the conversation around RPG design, for which we have provided links, references and definitions.

**Evan Torner:** In recent years, tabletop RPGs have become increasingly diverse tools of expression, with sources of inspiration that reach beyond standard fantasy, horror and science-fiction tropes. Your games in particular draw on fairly unconventional subject material: Vietnam war narratives in *carry* (2006), Gothic horror novels in *Annalise* (2008), art nouveau in *The Death of*

*the Gilded Age* (2014), to name a few. Tell us a little more about your sources of creative inspiration and that moment when you say: “This could be a role-playing game!”

**Nathan D. Paoletta:** Designing games is my medium, so I don’t think there’s a specific switch in my head for “this could be a role-playing game” as opposed to some other kind of artistic output I *could* be doing. That said, my sources of inspiration are pretty banal, and are often in service to constraints of some kind. I see a movie or read a book or something and have some thoughts about how that might turn into a game, and then sometimes it’s a sufficiently grabby idea and I try it out, or it ends up matching another project I’m working on better than what I already had in mind. For example, *carry* was originally a game design contest entry, with the constraints of something “historical,” and I wasn’t aware of any good Vietnam games. I actually literally flipped a coin between Vietnam and delving into the little I knew of Aztec history. *The Death of the Gilded Age*, on the other hand, was a theme that I then applied to a long-standing design idea I’d had that had never gelled. The final product was actually designed almost from a “graphics-out” as opposed to “mechanics-out” perspective.<sup>1</sup>

All of my games have a story like that behind them. I think there is this idea that when someone designs a game in a genre, it’s because they are in some way obsessed with or an expert in that genre, and in my case it’s almost the opposite. I feel like I become more expert in a genre *by* designing a game. *Annalise* is probably the only exception, in that I’ve always been fascinated by vampire stories and gothic horror, but I definitely read more during and after that process than I had before.

**ET:** Your latest game – *World Wide Wrestling* – manipulates the constraints of the pro wrestling world. The game’s subtitle is, interestingly enough: “The Professional Wrestling RPG of Narrative Action.” After having read it, I am under the impression that it is one of the most self-reflexive RPGs – that is, a role-playing *about* the act of role-playing – since Meguey Baker’s *1,001 Nights* (2006, 2012). How is narrative treated in the RPG, and how does that correspond with narrative conventions of pro wrestling?

**NDP:** This is a bit of a long answer, but there’s a lot here to talk about! One key insight for me was that both pro wrestling and role-playing are “live” media: watching a wrestling match in a vacuum is like listening to a recording of someone else play. You can see what’s going on, but you don’t *feel* it unless

1. “Graphics-out” refers to much of the initial design efforts being focused on the game’s visual design, as opposed to “mechanics-out” which would focus most initial energy on the game’s mechanics.

you're part of it. For pro wrestling, it's the relationship between the performers, the audience and the backstage storyline decisions (the "booking") that makes it its own art form. I try to reflect that in the game by keeping those three stakeholders distinct and mapping them to the role-playing group.

First, one of the key conceits in the game is the "Imaginary Viewing Audience," the idea that the SIS<sup>2</sup> is being performed in front of a fictional crowd, and that the feedback from that fictional crowd – governed by some of the game's mechanics – has an impact on the ongoing narrative. Of course, the Imaginary Viewing Audience is in fact the group itself, at the table, playing the game. In the same way that a player is simultaneously themselves as an actual person and their performative role, the actual group itself is assigned a performative role as the audience to their own play.

Second, players play professional wrestlers as *professionals*, in that the player's characters are the ones who take on fictional wrestling characters to perform in front of the Imaginary Viewing Audience, and those characters can change, be abandoned or evolve over time just as the player's character gets new stats and mechanical choices and improves their ability to perform through extended play. You play a character playing a character, essentially.

Finally, the GM role (called the "Creative" in this game) is much like the one in *1,001 Nights* in that it's a largely fiat-based<sup>3</sup> position that takes some classic GM duties that have historically opened the door into socially abusive or toxic behaviors and moves them front and center where they can be part of the game, and not hover over it unspoken. In particular, the Creative basically plans out each session in advance, down to who's going to win what match. In a way, this is a classic railroad<sup>4</sup> or "let's play through my story" mode, but the game uses wrestling tropes in order to hand in-play power to the individual players to *choose* to go with, or try and change ("swerve") what the Creative has planned during play itself. One of Creative's primary duties is to take these swerves and "make it look like it was planned that way all along" to the Imaginary Viewing Audience, which is both an key aspect of pro wrestling (i.e., not letting the real changes break the audience's suspension of disbelief), and also of improv-heavy GM and facilitation styles that are part of my personal play culture.

All of this meta-ness is (I hope) mostly embedded in the game itself. When

2. Forge abbreviation of "shared imaginary space," which the Forge Glossary defines as "The fictional content of play as it is established among participants through role-playing interactions."

3. In RPG theory, "fiat" means that a gamemaster has power to make arbitrary decisions that affect the lives of players with little to no justification.

4. "Railroading" means to force the narrative down a specific, often-predetermined path, usually by the GM.

you play it, you can just play, and if you want to pay attention to the meta factors you can, but – unlike, say, *Paranoia* (1984, 2009) or *The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1998) – the meta-ness of what you’re doing is key to the play experience.

**ET:** Indeed, your RPGs do well at accommodating multiple play agendas: I can play to win, play to lose, or play for some other reason, and the game still responds to my needs. In many ways, the designs respond to older debates about what the players apparently *want* from the fiction at the table and how that fiction is *produced*. How does adapting material from other media contribute to our theories about how role-playing works?

**NDP:** I subscribe to a pretty conservative version of the Big Model<sup>5</sup> in terms of my theory background and how I think about games as I construct them. So, in that context, the inspiration I draw from another media tends to start with Color<sup>6</sup> (and sometimes Setting), and I try to build systems that will reliably generate the Color that I’m aiming for. This may sound weird because many of my games (especially my older work, like *carry* and *Annalise*) have a dimension of emotional engagement, which tends to be cast as the opposite of “mere” Color. To me, though, color (in the colloquial sense) is the *entry point* into the narrative style or into the emotional engagement: when I play a game I usually need something very obvious around which to build my experience, either on the character level or something out there in the game world.

Again, in the pursuit of reliably generating Color, I usually end up having to deconstruct the moving parts of the genre in which I’m working, or at least the ones that are important to me for the purposes of the game. *World Wide Wrestling* is the clearest example of that, as it literally maps “things you see wrestlers do in real life” to “things your characters do in the game” on a pretty granular level. However, since my goal is to give the players tools to build their own worlds – essentially – *inside* these genres, I’m not interested in replicating those parts so that they are manipulated in play. I think that’s how many of the proto-games I see (like contest entries) tend to work, where the designer has made some observations about how the genre they’re

5. Ron Edwards’ definition of the Big Model: “A description of role-playing procedures as embedded in the social interactions and creative priorities of the participants.” Effectively, a designer’s creative agenda runs through everything from the social contract that permits the game to even happen right down to the ephemera produced in the fiction. [http://indierpgs.com/\\_articles/glossary.html](http://indierpgs.com/_articles/glossary.html)

6. Color in Forge terminology refers to all the imagined details surrounding a fictional setting, character, situation and/or system. See <http://lumpley.com/index.php/anyway/thread/166> and <http://www.indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=5172> for more discussion.

interested works, and so they turn those things into what the players *do* in the game. In *carry*, there's no rules for fighting enemies, just rules for how much damage your unit takes in engagements and who's to blame. Vietnam narratives *have* lots of firefights but they're (to me) *about* taking or missing opportunities and the guilt and blame that goes with those decisions.

To bring this back to how role-playing works: I think role-playing works best when you co-create something new together. I think it's the creation of a fiction that you would have never imagined by yourself that makes role-playing so unique, and slavishly aping genre tropes gets you... those genre tropes. Using game mechanics to direct a game towards the feelings that you get when you experience the inspirational genre is what interests me the most.

**ET:** So what you're saying, if I understand correctly, is that intuiting *emotional* effects of genre tropes is more important than simply citing those tropes through mechanics. What advice do you have for RPG designers for reading their own emotional state while they experience other media, and then putting game mechanics on those emotions?

**NDP:** Well, it's more important *to me*. I think there are plenty of folks who want to replicate genre tropes in their games, and that's fine. There are some very well-designed games that deliver that, as well. In terms of giving advice to people who want to design similar games to mine, however, I think there's a certain moment or sequence of moments in the fiction as you experience it that's "the thing" you want to have come out of the game. It's not always conscious, but if you're having trouble with your design on paper or your playtests falling flat, it's probably because you're not hitting "the thing" yet.

So it may not be a specific emotion, but you have a certain emotional response to "the thing," and it's that response that's important. When I watch *Platoon* (1986), what stands out to me is the iconic moment where Willem Dafoe rises to his knees for the last time before he finally dies, and the chopper with his fellow soldiers flies overhead. That moment encapsulates all the futility and tragedy of war, but casts it as a human drama, a result of decisions made by the men around him, not abstracted out to the level of political or military strategy. It is sad, but also deeply understandable at the same time. When I play *carry*, I do not want to necessarily *replicate* that moment in the fiction we create, but that mix of emotions and responses is what I want to get out of the game.

I do a lot of my design reflexively: by trying out an idea and then deciding if it works or not, so that internal yes/no measure one builds up by experience and paying attention to what you want out of the game on the emotional level. But identifying "the thing" targeted by your game design and analyzing, as an

audience member, the source media for how it was delivered may be a useful strategy to try out. I wish I was methodical enough to do it myself – maybe I’d get more done!

Also, it’s worth pointing out that people who are already enthusiastic fans of the genre in question tend to more naturally or automatically “get it” than those who aren’t, and that can paper over some flaws in your design if you aren’t paying close attention. One of my goals is to share my love of a genre with other people. With *World Wide Wrestling*, I did my best to playtest with folks who were not active wrestling fans, and that was really helpful in giving me feedback about my assumptions and what worked to build wrestling stories and what did not. So, in terms of actionable advice, try to play with people outside your usual circles and pay attention to when the game is pushing them to do things that are “in-genre” whether they knew about it beforehand or not. That’s the good stuff right there.

# Norwegian Surreal: An Interview with Ole Peder Giæver

Evan Torner

*Trying to get rich in this indie RPG game is kind of a hopeless project anyway. I think we all have “day jobs?”*

Ole Peder Ekelund Giæver can be said to be a regular border-crosser in terms of the role-playing medium.<sup>1</sup> Originally from Tromsø, Norway, he spent his formative years in Ytre Enebakk, and moved to Oslo as a teenager. He went on to earn his bachelor’s degrees in history, philosophy, and journalism. He currently works as a reporter for the online publication ABC Nyheter, helps run the weekly Norwegian larp podcast *Live om laiv* and contributes regularly to the Norwegian gaming zine *Imagonem*. A self-described “apolitical agnostic [with] culturally anarchist leanings,” Giæver has only recently come to the attention of role-playing gamers across the Atlantic as the co-author (with Martin Bull Gudmundsen) of surreal role-playing game *Itras By* (2012). The game takes place in a bizarre 1920s-era city belonging to the sleeping goddess Itra, whose dreams lurk behind both the city’s creation and its decay.

What marks Giæver’s work is a strong communicative framework for a fairly minuscule set of actual procedures that players must follow. In this respect, he champions the role that careful prose plays in delivering the content of a given role-playing game system and setting.<sup>2</sup> Here we talk about Giæver’s experiences with the development of tabletop and live-action role-playing

1. Here is Giæver’s self-proclaimed bibliography: *Itras By* (Norwegian tabletop RPG, self-published 2008, with Martin Bull Gudmundsen and others), *Norwegian Style* (Norwegian RPG anthology 2009, with the *Itras By*-cards by Ole Peder Giæver, Martin Bull Gudmundsen and Matthijs Holter), *Larps from the Factory* (Norwegian shortlarp scripts 2013, “The Hirelings” with Håken Lid), *Faktaløve: Rollespill* (Fact book for kids, Cappelen Damm 2014), *Birth of Larp in the Arab World* (anthology 2015, Brief/blog text contribution), *Imagonem.org* (Norwegian gaming zine, Regular contributor 1995–present), *Live om laiv* (weekly Norwegian larp podcast, Part of the editorial group, Jan 2015).

2. The emphasis on tight prose and delivery is also evident in the 200 Word RPG Challenge run by David Schirduan in April 2015 and the on-going “nano-games” movement in the indie RPG community since 2013.



games in Norway, as well as the design and distribution factors surrounding the cult success of *Itras By*.

**Evan Torner:** Tell us a little bit about the evolution of the Norwegian Style movement in role-playing design and your involvement in it.

**Ole Peder Gæver:** We had this web forum for Norwegian role-players running between 2003–2012. It’s still there, but no one uses it. We’re all on Facebook and everywhere else. Anyway, a hard core of 13–20 people were interested in game design, such that in 2004 Michael Stensen Sollien initiated a Game Chef-inspired competition that ran for several years. It did not have all the strictures with themes and ingredients, but the games were also supposed to be finished in a week. Over the years, the competition produced sketches and fairly half-assed results—some of which were mine—but also some pretty decent short games. Some were later polished and developed further.

Around 2007, I think, there was an initiative to collect some of them (and games that hadn’t been part of the competition) in an English-language anthology, *Norwegian Style*. It was published in 2009, and the blog by the same name was set up. The blog was also in English, and “Norwegian role-playing games in English” is the subtitle. The idea was to showcase some of our stuff to the international community. I’m not sure about sales, but I think it got a bit of buzz.

Matthijs Holter is, for all practical purposes, the main editor and contributor to the blog. But there have been others too over the years. It’s still a fairly eclectic mix of game sketches, blog-style meditations on various RPG-related subjects, some pretty complete games like *Archipelago* (2007, 2009), “role-playing poems,” playsets, scenarios and more. It is hard to say what is typical of these games. They are usually rules-light, and in communication with each other, “Nordic freeform” and the Anglo-American indie RPGs. Whilst doing their own thing. Whatever that is.

Matthijs had a blog post on this entitled “Stealing Like Ravens,” talking about that time when we basically agreed that we should feel free to use whatever cool concepts we all came up with:

*“Back when I was designing Draug, and Ole Peder and Martin were designing Itras By, we were a bit worried for a while that since we were playtesting each others’ games and pitching ideas, we might end up having our brilliant designs stolen by the other party. What if I came up with something great for Draug, and they published my ideas in their game – before I could publish mine? We talked about it, and quickly reached the agreement ‘fuck it, let’s steal from each other, good luck to whoever*

*publishes first\*\*.* I think that little talk was an important step for our part of the Norwegian design community – we’re very open-source, and share our ideas and games freely. Itras By incorporates elements from many different writers, and continues to do so on the Itras By wiki.”

Not everyone in the scene necessarily agrees 100% with this open source philosophy. But that was our opinion back then. There had been Norwegian game designs prior to the competition, but few and far between. What had happened on the web forum was sort of an explosion, with people of similar interests finding each other and being inspired by each other, some doing various projects together. It was fun. Martin Bull Gudmundsen and I had started work on *Itras By* in 2001, finally publishing it in Norwegian in 2008. Tomas H.V. Mørkrid was avant-garde before any of us, of course, publishing weird little indie games as far back as 1989 and all through the 1990s, while the rest of us were still thinking *Vampire: The Masquerade* was ground-breaking stuff.

Some of the most interesting or artsy larp stuff coming out of Norway happened in parallel with this. There is a lot of overlap between the communities. For example, I have attended many larps, but have organized close to zero. Typical for Norway, the tabletop and live-action creators and creations have remained fairly separate. That seems to be different in Denmark, where Bifrost organizes both larpers and pen-and-paper group, and the huge Facebook-group “Danske Rollespillere” covers both formats and has over 4000+ members. These days, events and coordination seem to be coalescing a bit, with people finding each other and talking across borders. Obviously, I am a fan.

But I do not think it’s meaningful to talk about a “Norwegian Style” movement/brand/scene in the singular. At least not in the sense that “jeepform” is a fairly organized “brand” where you know exactly which creators are in it and which games are canon because they put up a website that tells you that. Norwegian role-playing game designers are a small group— probably no more than 30, tops—who have done many things. Some—like my ever-productive friend Matthijs—still do, some might return to it, some have said their piece.

**ET:** What are, as you see it, the current trends in Norwegian game design, and how do you keep track of what is happening in the community?

**OPG:** There seems to be an interest in old school stuff and rules-light fantasy. On the Facebook-forum I help run, there were some recent initiatives to finally finish some games that have been in the works for years. One is *Wanderer*, a rules-light fantasy game. Some elements from the game were showcased in the Norwegian Style-book. It’s fairly old school stuff. There’s also a project going on to translate the OSR game *Basic Fantasy* to Norwegian. I

think it is good that people are talking again, creating stuff together, and that is partially thanks to the Facebook group creating a space for people to meet. Interesting, unforeseeable stuff will necessarily come out of that.

Matthijs still does a game for the blog now and then. I was contacted out of the blue by the National Museum of Arts to write a short collaborative storytelling game for an exposition they're doing (about Lord of the Rings and Norse Sagas/Mythology). Last year, Matthijs and I published *Rollespill*, a book for kids about role-playing games, sort of an introductory factbook, via a traditional publishing house. It was purchased by all the libraries in the country. Who knows? Maybe it will recruit some souls.

Tomas has announced he will finish the second edition of *Fabula*, the fantasy game he initially released in 1999. He has often had interesting approaches to method and techniques, so I will check that out. Since 2013, I have been very interested in Nordic freeform, and especially the Fastaval scene in Denmark. I feel very at home there. It has tabletop roots, but with avant-garde and larpy sentiments. I'm hugely impressed with their scenario tradition, how seriously they take it and their will to experiment. But I don't buy into it wholesale. I still want to do my own thing.

I plan to do a couple of larps, a long-form with Thomas Tollefsen, some esoteric-pervasive-personal-mindfuckery weirdness with the working title *Carnevale*. And a short larp with Ola Læhren that's basically just for fun, about regional prejudice in Norway, where you have to play a character with a different dialect than your own and all the characters are regional stereotypes.

**ET:** Some describe *Itras By* as a "surreal" role-playing game, others as "urban fantasy." How would you describe the game and its relationship to various genres and media?

**OPG:** Well, as Shakespeare said: "An ass by any other name would smell as sweet."

I was 20 when we started working on *Itras By*. I'm not an artist, and haven't studied art history. I read up on Breton's manifesto, liked the commercial artist Dalí, and enjoyed some of the core ideas of the movement as far as I understood them: the language games, the focus on dreams, madness, and the "subconscious." We tried to build something that would be sort of "intuitive" role-playing.

We mention several sources you could look into for further inspiration at the back of the book. Some of them are "intellectual ancestors."<sup>3</sup> Some of

3. Several of these ancestors include the films *Delicatessen* (1990) and *Chronopolis* (1982), TV series such as *Riget* (The Kingdom, 1994) and authors such as Franz Kafka and Roald Dahl.

it stuff we've read and enjoyed. Some of it I haven't—truth to be told—really seen. I never really got into Pratchett, for instance. I enjoyed *Junkie*, where Burroughs is writing in a realistic fashion about his experience as a drug addict, but couldn't really grok *Naked Lunch*.

There are a lot of pop-cultural references in the game. Some are quite subtle, some are concepts lifted outright from other sources. There's also a lot of my own and Martin's subconscious shit and neuroses, I think we could say. Some of the dream-texts in the book—like the clowns staring at you through the restaurant windows or the woman with insects pouring out of her stomach—are actual dreams I've had. The core concepts, vibe of the game and the name of the city is from the automatic text in the back of the book that I wrote in Fall 2001.

The blog "Age of Ravens" had a very thorough review of the game where the author looked into how to label it with respect to others. The reviewer knows a whole lot more about the art movement and such terminology than myself. He suggests it could be termed "surrealism-light," "new weird," or "magical realism." I think all of those sound cool, too.

**ET:** As a journalist, you take acts of communication very seriously. How did you communicate your expectations for player performance in *Itras By*?

**OPG:** I like the Forge maxim "System does matter," but I've also always cared deeply for what is sometimes condescendingly referred to as "fluff text."<sup>4</sup> Player advice, setting descriptions, those kinds of things. There's a lot of that in *Itras By*, and it takes up most of the text. We tried to be fairly pedagogic in explaining how to run the game, to make it approachable both for newbies and veterans who are used to other types of games. Some of it is in the form of "rules," but most is framed as suggestions:

*"Here are some ideas and effects you can try out (...)"*

*"Let the players add and describe elements from the popular culture of the city."*

*"Give the players limited authority over chance ("we happen to meet on the street")."*

4. RPG.net defines "fluff" as: "Slang for the parts of a RPG book other than the rules—such as setting details, game fiction, history, et cetera. Usually contrasted with Crunch, which is the actual rules." [http://wiki.rpg.net/index.php/RPG\\_Lexica:DEF](http://wiki.rpg.net/index.php/RPG_Lexica:DEF). Read Emily Care Boss's rebuttal to the false fluff/crunch dichotomy in the article "Skin Deep." *WyrdCon Companion Book 2012*, Eds. Sarah Lynne Bowman and Aaron Vanek. Mountain View, CA: WyrdCon, 2012, pp. 49-54.

*“Give the players whose characters are not present in the scene control over secondary characters who are.”*

Of course, the game’s cards themselves actively distribute authorship in various specific ways. They help players get into the mindset of the game, gradually liberating them a bit from the structure of more traditional games. That was a big element to many of the earlier games from The Forge scene as well, redistributing GM-power through various formal rules and procedures. We’re doing some of the same, but in a less formalized fashion.

Martin came up with those small boxes admonishing the reader to “make the city her own” by making actual physical changes to the book: crossing out paragraphs you dislike, stapling in your own passages, taking notes in the book and things like that. Everyone seems to like those boxes, because they have this punk-rock kind of ethos. But I’ve rarely, if ever, heard of anyone who actually did it to their book. It’s too darn pretty.

When GMing, I usually try to follow our own advice in the book, I hope. But we all develop our idiosyncratic style over the years. I’ll point at players, instructing them to play secondary characters (NPC) so-and-so for the duration of the scene, cut scenes abruptly, leave them to talk amongst themselves if they’re in a good groove, try to “say yes,” and give most player initiatives a chance. All of that good improv stuff. Letting loose, y’know? Trying to get away from that awful luggage of “the GM as God” who is somehow supposed to have planned everything about the background or even plotline in advance. Just accept it’s impossible, and try to work with the players instead of competing with them in some weird way. That’s how I like to play, anyway.

**ET:** *Itras By* has become something of a cult favorite on the global convention circuit. Once the game was ready for a national and international release, what did you do to keep it in the public eye?

**OPG:** Nationally: The book release was covered by around 15 different media outlets, everything from student radio to a big commercial radio station, anarchist rag to one of the largest online tabloids. The trick is to a) consider what kind of pitch will give meaning to the media given their profile and target audience, b) approach the right person, like journalists who’ve been friendly to this kind of material previously, or at least go to the culture section and not the news section. I also asked colleagues in various media for tips on to whom I should pitch it.

In the press release, I sold newsworthy elements such as Martin being kind of a reality documentary TV star at the time, Thore Hansen being a well-known illustrator—Martin and I grew up with fantasy and children’s books he’d

illustrated—our receiving a fair amount of public and private grant money for the project, it being the first such release in a few years, etc.

Håken Lid helped us to set up a pretty decent Norwegian website, with some scenarios, a gallery, a section with press clippings, a wiki etc. A local gaming festival in Oslo agreed to feature the game as their “main theme” the year of the release (2008). We had some posters and flyers at hipster joints around town, there was a release at a bar frequented by bohemians. I toured all the three biggest conventions in the country that year to promote the game...

I wouldn't really say all that publicity translated very directly to sales, though. At the time of writing, I think there are 425 copies of the physical Norwegian book in circulation (in 7 years). But that's actually quite fair for being a sort of niche, Norwegian, self-published RPG. By comparison, the fact book Matthijs and I published professionally last year has sold at least 2,000 copies in just a year, but that's mostly due to the library-thing I mentioned earlier.

Internationally speaking, I contacted a list of blogs and a few podcasts asking whether they wanted to review the game, sent out the PDFs or even bought them a physical copy of the book if they demanded that. It got a fair amount of reviews, article mentions and play reports, something like a dozen which I'm aware of.

But what has really boosted sales, more than doubled it, was the recent Indie RPG bundle. Prior to that, we'd sold 399 English books (print+PDF) since the English release in December 2012. With the bundle, we sold an additional 416 PDFs! It won't make you rich, but such bundle deals are a great way of getting your book out there. Trying to get rich in this indie RPG game is kind of a hopeless project anyway. I think we all have “day jobs?”

I don't speak Finnish (it's a different language group altogether), so I haven't done anything with promotion over there. I do believe it got a positive review in Helsingin Sanomat, which is one of the biggest newspapers. And an extremely negative review of the Finnish book, but in English on a blog.

It will soon be out in French with some additional material and new illustrations, German and Catalan. I think that's pretty neat, that someone likes it enough to translate it. I was responsible for most of the English tradition, stupid errors, wordiness and all.

It's also very cool that it actually gets played, as you mention. I Google it now and then, and I'm happy to see it's still alive and kicking. That was a big part of the point of doing the project in the first place. To have people play it, hopefully have fun with it, and maybe even teach them about how role-playing can be done.



# Appendix

*When the Settlers arrive on Catan, they quickly encounter the First Nations of Catan, a semi-nomadic people who begin competing with them for the resources that, until the Settlers' arrival, had been their undisputed right...*

## *First Nations of Catan*

- These rules allow one player in Settlers of Catan to play as the First Nations of Catan. Thus, this game supports up to 4 players (1, 2, or 3 Settler players and 1 First Nations player). This game has not been tested with the 5–6 player expansion set.
- Use the basic Settlers of Catan game set, plus one playing piece in the color chosen by the First Nations player (see section B).
- The following instructions address the First Nations player. Only a few changes affect the Settler players. These changes can be found in sections B, D, and E.

### *A. Setup*

- You place your settlement first, in the CENTER of any 1 tile. For the duration of the game, you will be playing on the center of the tiles, not on the edges as Settler players do.
- The Settler player to your left starts the usual settlement placing process, with this modification: All Settler-player settlements must be adjacent to a tile that borders the water. This represents the Settlers' arrival on Catan, while you have had the island to yourself since time immemorial.
- Settler players place their first and second settlements as the basic rules describe. You place your second settlement after all Settler players have placed their settlements, again in the middle of any tile. This is the only time you may build on a tile that has Settler objects on its edges. See section E.
- Once all settlements are on the board, find a marker in your color to indicate the Tribe. (Roads will be used for another purpose later. A City on its side will do in a pinch, or a ship or knight token from “Seafarers” or “Cities & Knights”, or any colored object that will fit on a tile). Place the Tribe at either of your settlements.



*B. On Your Turn: Moving the Tribe*

*In addition to settling villages and building cities, the First Nations of Catan are nomadic, traveling to gather the resources they require.*

- On your turn, roll the die. You, and all other players, gather resources on the number rolled. Then, move the Tribe (see below), and finally, build or trade (if you wish).
- You must move the Tribe every turn following this formula: Number on the dice / 4, rounded down. Thus, on a dice roll of 1-3, the tribe cannot move. On 4-7, they move one. On 8-11, they move two. On 12, they move three. The Tribe **MUST** move the full number of allowed movements. It may double-back over a tile multiple times, but it may not end on the tile where it started unless 1-3 was rolled.
- The Tribe takes one resource card for every tile it moves through or lands on, not counting the tile where it began. If the Tribe does not move, it gathers the resource where it remains.
- The Tribe does not move or gather resources on other players' turns.
- You may only build on the tile where the Tribe ends up (see section E).
- Settler-players may **NOT** build on any side or corner of the tile that the Tribe occupies.

*C. On Your Turn: Combat*

*Distressed at the rapidity of the Settlers' incursions, the First Nations rally their forces and attempt to drive these invaders out by force.*

- After you have moved the Tribe, you may attack the Settler-player pieces adjacent to the tile where the Tribe ends its movement. Whenever you attack, you must attack **ALL** pieces adjacent to that tile.
- Discard the cost of a Development card (sheep, wheat, stone). For each Settler-player's piece (road, settlement, or city), roll a single die. If you roll 4-6, you destroy that piece. Remove it from the board and return it to the appropriate player. If you roll 1-3, you may not remove that piece this turn.
- A Settler-player may play a Knight card **AFTER** you have declared your attack, **BEFORE** you roll, in order to defend any piece. That player should indicate which piece, if there are multiple, that they are defending. A Knight may defend a Settler-player piece of **ANY** color. If a Knight is defending a piece, you must roll a 6 to remove it.

You may play your own Knight to neutralize a Settler-player's Knight. Both Knights cancel one another out, but still count toward each player's total number of Knights for the Largest Army tile.

- If you successfully remove ALL Settler-player pieces from the tile where the Tribe is (or if there were none there to begin with), you may build there. If you successfully remove 2 or more Settler-player pieces, you have defended your territory! Place a road piece in your color on the center of the tile. This is not a road, but a Defended Territory marker. It is worth 1 VP at the end of the game.
- Whenever a Settler-player builds on a tile that has a defended territory marker, remove that marker. If you reclaim that tile by defending territory at a later time, replace the marker.
- Destroying only 1 Settler-player piece does not earn you a Defended Territory marker, though it will allow you to build on that tile.

#### *D. On Your Turn: Building & Trading*

- You may, on your turn, build settlements or cities, or buy development cards. You may not build roads.
- You may only build in the center of a hex, not on its edges as the Settler players do.
- You may only build a new settlement on the tile where the Tribe marker is. Remember: move first, then build.
- You may upgrade an existing settlement to a city without the Tribe being present.
- You may not build a new settlement on a hex that has Settler-player objects (roads, settlements, cities) adjacent to it.
- You may buy development cards.
- You may trade with any player(s) AFTER you have moved the Tribe.
- You may trade 4:1 with the bank on your turn. You may not use ports to trade.
- Settler-players MAY build on tiles that have your Settlements/Cities on them. They MAY NOT build on the tile where the Tribe is.

#### *E. On Every Turn*

- Your settlements yield the resource they are on whenever the number is rolled.
- Your cities yield 2 of the resource they are on whenever the number is rolled.

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- You may trade with any player on their turn as long as they initiate the trade.

### *F. Winning*

You win in the same way that the other players win: by accruing 10 Victory Points. You may accrue Victory points as follows:

- By playing Development Cards that have Victory Points on them.
- By building settlements (1VP) and cities (2VP).
- By defending territory (1VP).
- By acquiring the Largest Army tile.
- You may not acquire the Longest Road tile, as you do not build roads.

### *G. Robber & Other Rules*

- If a rule's change is not mentioned here, assume that basic *Settlers of Catan* rules apply to you. The hand limit, the rules about playing Development cards, etc. all apply.
- If the Robber occupies the same hex as one of your settlements, it takes effect as if it were a normal Robber, and you may use Knights in the usual way to dislodge the Robber. The Robber does not affect the Tribe.

## About the Authors

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develops games, both digital and analog, and both serious and occasionally absurd.

## About the ETC Press

ETC Press is a publishing imprint with a twist. We publish books, but we're also interested in the participatory future of content creation across multiple media. We are an academic, open source, multimedia, publishing imprint affiliated with the Entertainment Technology Center (ETC) at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) and in partnership with Lulu.com. ETC Press has an affiliation with the Institute for the Future of the Book and MediaCommons, sharing in the exploration of the evolution of discourse. ETC Press also has an agreement with the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) to place ETC Press publications in the ACM Digital Library.

ETC Press publications will focus on issues revolving around entertainment technologies as they are applied across a variety of fields. We are looking to develop a range of texts and media that are innovative and insightful. We are interested in creating projects with Sophie and with In Media Res, and we will accept submissions and publish work in a variety of media (textual, electronic, digital, etc.), and we work with The Game Crafter to produce tabletop games.

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This is definitely an experiment in the notion of publishing, and we invite people to participate. We are exploring what it means to "publish" across multiple media and multiple versions. We believe this is the future of publication, bridging virtual and physical media with fluid versions of

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publications as well as enabling the creative blurring of what constitutes reading and writing.

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