

7.5 Aliens against Alienation. How queer developers subvert gameplay (doing it themselves)

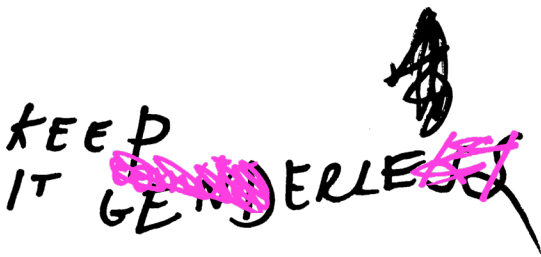
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A b s t r a c t

In her call to arms book, *Rise of Video Game Zinesters* (2012), game developer Anna Anthropy describes videogame industry as a round-the-drain cycle in which games are designed by a male-dominated culture and marketed to a small male-dominated audience. According to the author, the only way to fight this alienation is that different kind of people start to produce games by using user-friendly tools (like Twine or RPG Maker) as a means of self-expression. In this paper I will point towards some of the strategies deployed by artists in order to undermine game conventions, to provide unexpected game experiences and to put the player in someone else's shoes.

Keywords: *Queer-gaming, game culture, critical play, subversion.*

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1. About videogame (queer) analysis

A few words about videogame (queer) analysis. Since the rise of game studies, a number of scholars from widely diverse academic fields have tried to approach videogames using the specific means provided by their theoretical camps. As a result, the early days of the debate on video games have been characterized by the ideological dichotomy between ludologists and narratologists. Before moving on video game analysis, it must therefore be emphasized that there is not an unequivocal framework to which we can refer in order to perform it:

Due to their inherent multi-medial and multi-experiential qualities, video games are among the most complex “texts” that scholars analyse today. In addition to such literary commonplaces as plot, dialogue, setting, characterization, and so on, video games often invoke a flood of interconnected media forms, styles, and genres, from still photography, chiaroscuro, lens flares, and stop-motion animation, to genre forms such as westerns, noir, and horror, to play styles that include platforming, racing, shooting, and puzzle solving. Realistically, given this diversity of integrated interpretative stock, there is no definitive method for analysing video games. What the field of game studies is gradually realizing

(...) is that video games, like many other forms of old and new entertainment media, need to be explicated in a variety of ways and with the operative presumption that such analyses are cumulative and complementary – even when they contradict one another (McAllister and Ruggill, 2015, p. 12).

The venture becomes even more complicated analysing video games through the lens of queer studies. Nevertheless, the convergence between queer studies and game studies, which started not so long ago in North America, can breathe new life into video game analysis by providing a point of view focused on video game queer potential, challenging dichotomies and rigid frameworks and destabilizing conventional game making and game playing:

Queer game studies open up possibilities for queer game play that is not about finding the “real” meaning of a game text, but playing between the lines with queer reading tactics. It considers gaming counterpublics as a space for reimagining whom games are for and who is for games (Ruberg and Shaw, 2017, p. x).

Even though queer game studies can't be considered a veritable discipline primary because of their lack of rigidity – it would be better to consider them a paradigm (Ruberg and Shaw, 2017) – the queer approach to game analysis can implement more classic approaches in order to better understand some aspects that are usually overlooked or even neglected, in terms of contents as well as game mechanics. Moreover, LGBTQ aspects are not necessarily prevailing, because “queerness, at heart, can be defined as the desire to live life otherwise, by questioning and living outside normative boundaries” (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017, p. x). In video games field, boundaries are imposed by game genres and conventional patterns of play established by the game industry. An example of queer video game without LGBTQ contents could be *Passage*¹⁸⁵, a short 2D game developed in 2007 by the independent artist Jason Rohrer. At first sight, *Passage* seems to be a conventional game in which the player controls

a male avatar through a maze representing a lifespan from the young adulthood to death. As claimed by the author (Rohrer, 2007) and by Patrick Jagoda, who curated with Michael Maizels the first retrospective dedicated to Rohrer,

Passage contributes to the long artistic tradition of the memento mori (...). In contrast to such historical works, Rohrer's interactive memento mori requires the player to be complicit in the protagonist's death. And unlike earlier Christian examples of the form (...), Passage foregrounds a series of choices that are ultimately of little consequence (Maizels and Jagoda, 2016, p. 27).

Every play session of *Passage* lasts no more than five minutes, at the end of which the avatar simply dies. Nevertheless, the player may choose how to take advantage from this amount of time, running straight into the future or exploring the maze in pursuit of some reward, all alone or with a companion. Every decision will affect the gameplay experience: for instance, if the player choose to join up with a spouse on his journey, once she dies the avatar will move more slowly (Rohrer, 2007). Comparing *Passage* to similar mainstream role-playing videogames, it becomes pretty clear that Rohrer's game is not challenging at all: there are no enemies to defeat, no character upgrade – the avatar goes more and more weak – and the reward system reveals itself useless. Briefly, *Passage* queers game conventions giving the player an unexpected gameplay experience. Therefore, a queer perspective on *Passage* could underline and bring out game's potential that in this particular case has to be found beyond game contents. Indeed, the relationship between the two only game characters is heteronormative: as claimed by Rohrer, the male character represents the author himself, and the female non-player character is Rohrer's wife (Rohrer, 2007). However, the author encourages players to give their personal interpretation of the game (Rohrer, 2007). My opinion is that one of the possible queer analysis of *Passage* is closely related to the idea of failure. Generally speaking, we cannot obviously consider death as a failure. But in video games – at least in conventional ones – when the avatar dies the game is over, and the player must make use of his gamer skills in order to avoid it. In other words, in video games death is a form of failure. According to Jasper Juul,

(...) humans have the fundamental desire to succeed and feel competent, but game players have chosen to engage in an activity in which they are almost certain to fail and feel incompetent, at least some of the time (Juul, 2013, p. 2).

This is what Juul calls “the paradox of failure in games”: even though we tend to avoid failure, we play games because in this way we can experience something that we normally avoid (Juul, 2013). In this sense, games are a sort of safe space. In order to solve this paradox, the author introduces the idea of a-hedonism. “This type of solution”, Juul says, “denies the first premise of the paradox by saying that humans are not simply pain-avoiding, pleasure seeking creatures” (Juul, 2013, p. 7). As stated by Jack Halberstam (2011) in the book *The Queer Art of Failure*, failure represents an alternative to hegemonic systems. During a conversation with Juul moderated by Ruberg, Halberstam said:

Someone might actually want to fail, because they're so dissatisfied with a particular social context. Take the social context of capitalism, for example. If winning the game of capitalism means accumulating wealth, then it may well be that anticapitalists want to fail at the game in order to produce other ways of thinking about money, other ways of thinking about relationships through property, or possession, or whatever it may be. But if you move to the realm of heterosexuality and heteronormativity, the queer becomes the failure logic. In an homophobic logic, the queer fails to be straight, literally. The butch fails to be a woman. The sissy boy fails to be a man. The queer adult fails to get married and have children. They all fail in their socially prescribed role. (Ruberg, 2017, p. 202).

Therefore, moving to the realm of video games, a game that is designed to be unwinnable because elements that would make it conventionally fun to play – a challenge, for instance – are discarded, could be seen as queer. In fact, according to Halberstam, Juul's idea of a-hedonism is implicitly queer (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017, p. 201). As said, death in *Passage* is something given, so that the player, in this sense, has no choice but to fail. This design choice shifts player's attention to other aspects that do not concern the dichotomy success/failure. In other words, player's choices have a qualitative impact – rather than quantitative – on the gameplay experience:

Part of the goal (...) is to get you to reflect on the choices that you make while playing. The rewards (...) come in the form of points added to your score, and you have two options for scoring points: treasure chests, which give 100 points for each hit, and exploration, which gives double-points if you walk with your spouse. There's a pretty tight balance between these two options---there's no optimal choice between the two. Yes, you could spend your five minutes trying to accumulate as many points as possible, but in the end, death is still coming for you. Your score looks pretty meaningless hovering there above your little tombstone. (Rohrer, 2007, w/p).

This treatment of character death stands in stark contrast with the way death is commonly used in video games (where you die countless times during a given game and emerge victorious---and still alive---in the end). *Passage* is a game in which you die only once, at the very end, and you are powerless to stave off this inevitable loss (Rohrer, 2007).

On an emotional level, the queer potential of *Passage* and similar games is therefore stronger than the queer potential of a game like *Muscle March*, in which the game mechanics are the same of Japanese TV game *Brain Wall* (also known as Human Tetris) and characters are explicitly gay, but the game design is all oriented to fun.

2. Queer call for radical, avant-garde, subversive, critical, weirdo (etcetera) video games

Queer call for radical, avant-garde, subversive, critical, weirdo (etcetera) video games. In video game field, AAA (pronounced “triple-A”) is “a high quality game that is expected to be among the year’s best sellers” (Jones & Hertz, 2007, p.12). For the most part, these high-budget video games have a lot of similarities between them in relation both to design and contents. As Anna Anthropy notes:

Limitations of games aren't just thematic. (...) Most games are copies of existing successful games. They play like other games, resemble their contemporaries in shape and structure, have the same buttons that interact with the world in the same way (mouse to aim, left click to shoot), and have the same shortcoming (Anthropy, 2012, p. 5).

In their discourse on video game culture, Daniel Goldberg and Linus Larsson claim that even though video game nowadays is part of our culture, it still fails to engage strong social issues, politics, etc. (Goldberg & Larsson, 2015). Of course, there are some “experimental” exceptions, but as stated by the authors,

Video game culture has been reluctant to step out of the boys' room. (...) Game designer have historically eschewed reality and the present day for the fantastical and imaginary, with light-hearted science fiction, fantasy, and fairy-tale settings as staples of the form (Goldberg and Larsson, 2015, p. 7).

Naturally, the inflexibility of video game culture depends not only on game designers, but also on specialist gaming press and game production:

The specialist gaming press has a long tradition of consumer-oriented criticism, using simple, quantifiable parameters to measure the technical proficiency and craftsmanship of the game designer, the 'fun level' of the game, and the 'value for the money the game provides'. (...) Video game production has historically been prohibitively expensive and time-consuming, giving big name publishers a virtual monopoly on production, sales, and marketing. As a result, the culture identity of 'gamer' was from an early stage largely appropriated and shaped by the dominant corporate interests of the industry (Goldberg & Larsson, 2015, p. 8).

In fact, as noted by Leigh Alexander, gaming culture was founded by outcast and weirdos in the late 1970s and 1980s, and the modern game industry emerged only later as a result of “a certain lack of self-esteem that maybe isn't surprising for a medium born of nerds” (Alexander, 2017, p. 56). Of

course, things are much more complicated than this. However, it is clear that during video game early days game designers were driven by the willingness to experiment with the new-born video form. But “since Doom and Counter-Strike began colonizing student computer labs all across the nation, the muscle-bound first-person shooter has been the dominant paradigm, though far from the sole one” (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017, p. 56). As a transgender game designer, Anna Anthropy claims that, at least in 2012, there was no game about her or anyone like her:

Mostly, videogames are about men shooting men in the face. Sometimes they are about women shooting men in the face. Sometimes the men who are shot in the face are orcs, zombies, or monsters. (...) The few commercial games that involve a woman protagonist in a role other than slaughterer put her in a role of servitude: waiting tables at a diner (or a dress shop, a pet shop. A wedding party). This is not to say that games about head shots are without value, but if one looked solely at videogames, one could think the whole of human experience is shooting men and taking their dinner orders (Anthropy, 2012, p. 5).

In the opinion of the artist, the problem with videogames is that they are created by a small group of people within a white, male-dominated culture for a small, male dominated audience. This is therefore a round-the-drain cycle that leaves out of the industry anyone outside the dominating group, fuelling what Anna Anthropy calls the “Culture of Alienation”. “It’s a bubble”, the artist writes, “and it largely produces work that has no meaning to those outside that bubble” (Anthropy, 2012, p. 13). As suggested by Anna Anthropy, as well as other game designers like Merritt Kopas and Mattie Brice, the only way to burst the game industry bubble is to create game that challenge it in terms of creativity, making simple short games that anyone can play. Anna Anthropy goes to the point: “the focus of video games could shift from features (...) to ideas” (Anthropy, 2012, p. 19).

2.1. It’s all about subversion

In her book *Critical Play*, game designer Mary Flanagan looks to games as means of critical thinking and creative expression, pointing out the urge of a critical approach in creating and playing them:

Critical play means to create or occupy play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life. These questions can be abstract, such as rethinking cooperation, or winning, or losing; concrete (...). Critical play is characterized by a careful examination of social, cultural, political, or even personal themes that function as alternates to popular play spaces (Flanagan, 2009, p. 6).

The notion of subversion introduced by Flanagan in *Critical Play* is closely related to the notion of the critical by artists, as evidenced by Marcel Duchamp’s ready-made sculptures that turned everyday objects into something somehow

scandalous or the cross-gender self-portraits photographs made by the photographer Claude Cahun (Flanagan, 2012). In *Critical Play*, the notion of subversion is developed from Antonio Negri's idea that "subversive practices still have the power to trigger social change when used on the right scale and with the right tools" (Flanagan, 2009, p. 11). As Flanagan demonstrates, because of its importance as cultural medium game might be a tool of subversion (Flanagan, 2009).

Avant-garde game design is another notion introduced by Flanagan and resurfaced in Brian Shrank's (2014) book *Avant-garde Videogames*, in which the author focuses on videogame as avant-garde art. In his work, Shrank considers avant-garde as "the force that opens up the experience of playing a game or expands the ways in which games shape culture" (Shrank, 2014, p. 3), and explores some avant-garde approaches to games. The author identifies two broad avant-garde strategies resulting from Peter's Burger's Theory of the Avant-garde and Clement Greenberg's *Avant Garde and Kitsch*: a formal avant-garde and a political avant-garde (Shrank, 2014). The formal avant-garde "is realized in individual experience, letting art advise itself without regard of social concerns", whereas political avant-garde "is realized in collective experiences, politicizing art or using art to change society" (Shrank, 2014, p. 14). Whether formal or political, compared to a mainstream video game, an avant-garde video game does not follow what the author calls "the familiar flow of games" (Shrank, 2014, p. 4). "Counter gaming" is a further subversive idea provided by Alexander L. Galloway. In his book *Gaming. Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, the author looks to game mods as disruptive in relation to the intuitive flow of gameplay that characterizes industry's design style, taking Peter Wollen's seven theses on counter-cinema as reference (Galloway, 2006). It seems to me that Flanagan's notion of radical game design, as well as Shrank's notion of avantgarde games and Galloway's notion of counter gaming, is inherently queer. All of them, following different paths, lead the designer and the player to rethink games, subverting conventions and breaking the familiar flow imposed by the multi-billion game industry, although none of them capture the queer nuances of games precisely because of their rigidity. It is interesting to note, however, that all the above-mentioned authors, as well as other critics, designers, and scholars¹⁸⁶ consider it necessary to do so:

An independent gaming movement has yet to flourish, something that comes as no surprise, since it took decades for one to appear in the cinema. But when it does, there will appear a whole language of play, radical and new, that will transform the counter gaming movement, just as Godard did to the cinema, or Deleuze did to philosophy, or Duchamp did to the art object (Galloway, 2006, p. 126).

According to the author, as Godard awaited "the end of the cinema with optimism", so counter gaming movement should aspire to a similar goal, "redefining play itself and thereby realizing its true potential as a political and cultural avant-garde" (Galloway, 2006, p. 126). Fortunately, more than a decade after Galloway's call for a counter gaming movement, something is slowly but inexorably changing. There is no a veritable counter gaming movement yet, but during the last decade more and more authors are resisting to videogame

¹⁸⁶Tracy Fullerton, for instance, has developed a "Playcentric Approach" in order to create innovative games which are created taking into consideration the player experience at each stage of game design process (Fullerton, 2014). Furthermore, in her book *Game Design Workshop*, Fullerton encourages her students to find inspiration in ordinary things.

industry alienation. In the following section, I will talk about queer strategies deployed by artists and game designers in order to unleash video game queer potential by proposing a new pool of experiences, pushing the boundaries of ordinary gameplay experience.

3. Reading queer games queerly

How can games be read queerly? My claim is that there is not a right way to do this. The queer potential emerges through games in very different ways that can also be contradictory. I think that a key to queer interpretation of games could be developed by pointing towards the ways in which a certain game subverts the dominant formats of video games, undermining genre conventions and providing unexpected gameplay experiences.

3.1. Making zine games: *Dys4ia* by Anna Anthropy

In her call to arms book *Rise of videogame Zinesters*, Anna Anthropy notes that until not so long ago the creation of games was limited to people that know how to program, while it was daunting for someone who doesn't code professionally (Anthropy, 2012, p. 9). However, since Internet has made self-publishing possible and more and more user-friendly tools has been designed for people who aren't professional coders, a new range of possibilities have been open-up in digital games field. For years, Anna Anthropy has been fighting in order to encourage hobbyists, independent game designers and zinesters to make their own games and distribute them outside the videogame industry, as if they were zines:

What I want from videogames is for creation to be open to everyone, not just to publishers and programmers. I want games to be personal and meaningful, not just pulp for an established audience. I want game creation to be decentralized. I want open access to the creative act for everyone. I want games as zines (Anthropy, 2012, p. 12).

Dys4ia is an autobiographical game about hormone replacement therapy, one of the best known Anthropy's zine-games. In terms of structure, *Dys4ia* is made by a number of minigames which are very easy to master, so they could potentially be played by people who are not familiar with videogames. Comparing *Dys4ia* to mainstream games with similar structures – like *Lazy Jones* and *Hot Pixels* – it can be noticed that even the latter include some queer aspects, they all present canonical game mechanics, they are supposed to be fun, and they are challenging also because of the temporality aspect. Time pressure is an important element, that brings the player back to the “arcade” tradition. In her work, Anna Anthropy queers canonical and archetypical game mechanics and conventions, making them meaningful in the context of a personal narrative – for instance, she queers Tetris in order to express the feeling of inadequacy related to her body, and in the same way she queers PacMac to express the sense of hunger caused by the hormones.

3.2. Simplifying game mechanics (making them significant): *Lim* by Merritt Kopas

*Lim*¹⁸⁷ is a game created by Merritt Kopas. It is a very simple game, in terms of both graphics and game mechanics. There are no identifiable characters: player's avatar is a coloured block, and the other coloured blocks on the screen react violently if your colour is different than theirs, pushing the player's block around a maze. There is also the possibility that player's avatar is pushed outside the maze, being therefore deprived of the game experience. In this case, the player can get the end of the game navigating the maze from the outside. In order to not being attacked, the player may choose to "blend in" his/her block¹⁸⁸ by holding the Z button, but your movement is slowed, and the camera begins to shake. Clearly, blending in is a form of violence that player imposes to himself/ herself, and it can be as painful as the violence imposed by others. *Lim* may be read as a metaphor of the difficulties of a queer woman living in a society that leaves queer people at margins, or as a metaphor of a queer developer who have to work outside the industry in order to develop and distribute her/his own games. As noted by Henry Jenkins: "what *Lim* demonstrates is a set of fundamental game mechanics that emerge from a life experience that exceeds gender binaries" (Jenkins, 2013). It is interesting to note that, at first sight, *Lim* may look like a conventional – although chip – maze game. However, in relation to Pac-Man or other less-known maze game variations, *Lim* does not fulfil any maze game convention, which is why the game cannot be analysed with the means of mainstream critics – they would make the game look of poor quality. In contrast to conventional maze games, there are not power-ups nor weapons, so that the player is forced to adopt a passive gameplay attitude and to focus on aspects other than achieve meaningless objectives.

3.3. Modding mainstream games: *Gay Popeye* by Jeff Hong

As a visual artist, Jeff Hong is involved in a number of personal projects. In 2014 he launched a series called *Punktendo*, which "combines the three-chord simplicity of punk rock with the 8-bit simplicity of Nintendo games" (Ozzi, 2014) by replacing some of the most famous Nintendo games main characters with popular punk-rock musicians. There are also some games that are inspired by social issues of punk, and *Gay Popeye* is one of them. Even though the game is not intended to be queer – the author never used this term – it presents a queer narrative. The original Nintendo game puts on the heteronormative love triangle among Popeye, Olive and Bluto. The main objective of the game, which have similar mechanics to Donkey Kong, is to help Popeye claim Olive's love reaching her on the top of the screen, after avoiding Bluto's attacks. In *Gay Popeye*, Hong maintain the original game mechanics and changes the characters so that Popeye claims Bluto's love instead of that of Olive. It might seem a simplistic operation, but Bluto e Popeye are conventionally two white, strong, male, heterosexual, stereotypical characters who are turned gay by the author. By subverting the game imagery, Hong gives the game a new meaning, unleashing its queer potential.

3.4. Removing recurring features: *Mainichi* by Mattie Brice

*Mainichi*¹⁸⁹ is an autobiographical game about author's day-to-day life as a queer, multiracial woman. *Mainichi* is also the Japanese word for "everyday".

¹⁸⁷Retrieved from: <http://www.gamesforchange.org/game/lim/>

¹⁸⁸ While blending, the player's block becomes the colour of the surrounding blocks. Retrieved from: <http://punktendo.com/NES/popeye.html>

¹⁸⁹Retrieved from: <http://www.gamesforchange.org/game/mainichi/>

In fact, playing *Mainichi* is like to flip through Mattie Brice's diary. According to the author the game "is an experiment in sharing a personal experience through a game system" (Brice, 2012). The personal experience is the simple act to meet a friend for coffee as a mixed transgender woman. The game looks like a conventional RPG like *Pokémon* or *Final Fantasy* early episodes, but a lot of recurring features – fighting sessions or inventory menu, for instance – have been removed and settings are based on reality, so that the emphasis is on dialogues, and player focuses her/his attention on avatar's feelings. Furthermore, *Mainichi* forces the player to go through the same day over and over again, denying character's evolution, which is another feature that characterizes the majority of RPG games. The queer researcher Spencer Ruelos writes:

The design of the game, making you relive the same day over and over again shares experiences of what means to navigate the world as a trans woman of colour and to constantly experiencing microaggressions regarding your gender and race. (...) This 'hyper personal' narrative, rather than disconnecting us from Brice's characters, immerses players into her experiences, allowing for players to identify with her character and connect with her experiences of both pleasure and discrimination (Ruelos, 2016).

As well as Anna Anthropy's *Dys4ia* and Merritt Kopa's *Lim*, *Mainichi* falls into the category of "personal games". As Mattie Brice claimed in an interview with Leigh Alexander,

I feel games also can, and maybe should sometimes, resist players. If there's such a thing as 'death of author', I think there should be de 'death of the player.' Players shouldn't have to be... the most important thing for games, especially as we live with an audience that's so homogeneous (Alexander, 2013).

Therefore, in addition to undermine RPG genre conventions, *Mainichi* deeply sabotages the relationship between the designer and the player. In this case, Mattie Brice's approach to game design is opposite to that of Fullerton, challenging the primacy of play-centric design (Rusch, 2017, p. 120).

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