



Manchester Game Centre presents

Multiplatform 2024

Queer Games and Playful Protest

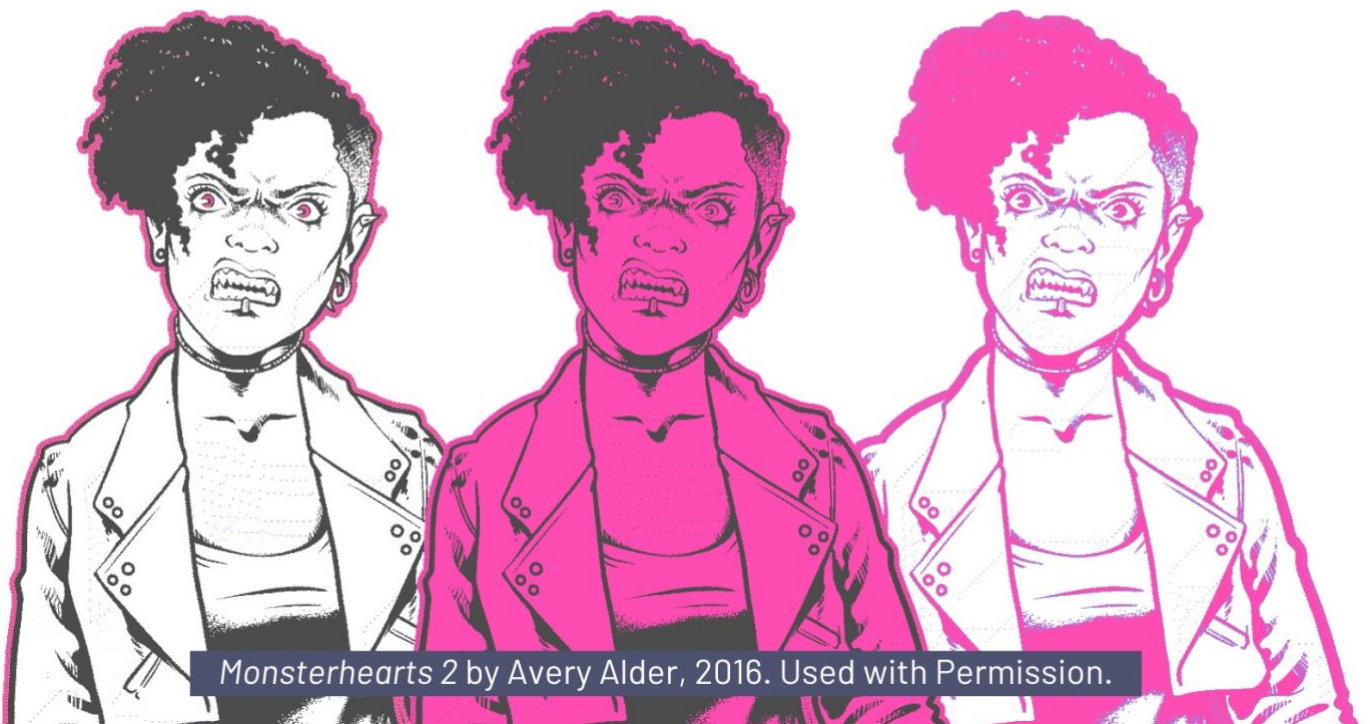
June 11 - 12

Keynote Speakers:

Jess Metheringham, Dissent Games

Gaspard Pelurson, King's College London

Hanne Grasmø, Tampere University



Monsterhearts 2 by Avery Alder, 2016. Used with Permission.



Multiplatform 2024

QUEER GAMES AND PLAYFUL PROTEST

Queer Games Symposium, Tuesday 11th June 2024

Lecture Theatre (GF11), Grosvenor East Building, Oxford Road Campus

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| 9:00 – 9:30 | Arrival, Coffee, and Registration |
| 9:30 – 11:00 | Keynote 1 Gaspard Pelurson (Kings' College, London) and Hanne Grasmø (Tampere University) |
| | Break (10 mins) |
| 11:10 – 12:20 | Panel 2: Queering Game Mechanics and Rules David Popelka (University of Manchester), Bea Livesey-Stephens (Abertay University), Gabe Elvery (Glasgow University) and Francis Gene-Rowe (Winchester School of Art). |
| 12:20 – 13:00 | Lunch (provided) |
| 13:00 – 14:00 | Workshop: 'Dissent through Play', with Jess Metheringham (Dissent Games) |
| | Break (10 mins) |
| 14:10 – 15:20 | Panel 3: Players Hollie Wistow (University of Nottingham), Michael Freudenthal (Experice, Sorbonne Paris Nord), and Mark Maletka (Tampere University) |
| | Coffee and Cake Break (10 mins) |
| 15:30 – 16:40 | Panel 3: Queer World/ing Rob Gallagher (King's College), Feng Zhu (King's College) and Esther MacCallum-Stewart (Staffordshire University) |
| | Break (10 mins) |
| 16:50 – 18:00 | Panel 4: Beyond the Game Paige Cooper (University of Edinburgh), Joe Macleod-Iredale (Manchester Game Centre), Lynn Love, Gaz Robinson and Kayleigh McLeod (Abertay University) |

Game Lab Networking Event and Archive Launch, Wednesday 12th June 2024

International Anthony Burgess Foundation, Cambridge Street, Manchester

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|---------------|--|
| 9:45 – 10:00 | Arrival, Coffee, and Registration |
| 10:00 – 12:30 | Game Lab Networking Event <ul style="list-style-type: none">Welcome from the Manchester Game Centre (Jenny Cromwell, Chloé Germaine and Paul Wake)Introductions from game lab representativesBritish DiGRA (Tom Brock, Manchester Game Centre)Game in Lab – an introduction (Michael Freudenthal, Thomas Pinto, Léa Martinez, Game in Lab and Asmodee)Discussion |
| 12:30 – 13:30 | Lunch (provided) |
| 13:30 – 16:00 | Manchester Game Centre Archive Launch (Dr Jenny Cromwell and Sam Jolly) |



‘How The Last of Us Part II Queers Ludology: Allowing Its Player to Interact with Queer and Trans Theory through Play, Pleasure, Affect, and Narrative’, Paige Cooper (University of Edinburgh)

Towards the beginning of modern ludological studies the game developer EA proposed, ‘Can video games make you cry?’. Assessing video games as emotive tools for encouraging feeling and identity exploration within players has become a major focus within gamic academia. The ethics surrounding translating complex, intimate human identities and experiences are highly contested, with experts realizing that gaming mechanics and the act of play do not exist as solitary experiences. Instead, there exists a degree of subjectivity within the nature of video games by allowing the player to interpret their desires, relationships, and identities with the world around them. Queer and Trans theory exist within such narratives, with video games allowing players to inhabit bodies, identities, and characters that ‘queer’ sexuality and gender. This paper goes beyond the binary of classical media studies to explore what it means for game narratives and mechanics to be used as tools for personal exploration. In addition, this paper uses Naughty Dog’s 2020 game *The Last of Us Part II* as a particularly interesting case study for how Queer and Trans theory within games allow the player to interact with narratives outside of the strictly heteronormative and cisnormative. Furthermore, what it means to interact with complex aspects of Queer and Trans theory outside of ‘queer joy’ when the narratives are heavily negative, violent, and graphic. Naturally, there are limits to a studio’s ability to communicate highly subjective human experiences like Queer and Trans Theory within game mechanics. In creating a game that centers Queer and Trans identities around part of the narrative, and as a major aspect of personal interaction within the game, one must ask how the act of play affects the player’s own interpretations of Queer and Trans Theory.

Paige Cooper is earning her Masters of Art with Honours in History and History of Art from the University of Edinburgh and Edinburgh College of Art. Throughout University video games have been her chief interest, from the anthropological effects games have to the literal mechanics of gaming. At Edinburgh College of Art, Paige works at the Digital Lab for Islamic Visual Culture and Collections with Dr. Glaire Anderson. Most recently, the Lab has assisted in historical consultancy work and developing the educational features for Ubisoft’s *Assassin’s Creed: Mirage* (2023, Ubisoft). Questions regarding the ability to accurately recreate historic cultures, capture diverse identities, and communicate narratives outside of the accepted ‘canon’ of video games have been Paige’s particular focus. She finds the ethics of blending intimate human identities and cultures with technology fascinating, especially as our society continues to become increasingly intertwined with our machines.



‘Sometimes when you lose, you win’: Glimpsing Utopia with the Queer Art of Failure, Gabe Elvery (Glasgow University) and Francis Gene-Rowe (Winchester School of Art)

Late-stage capitalism has shaped the world into an increasingly dystopian reality that demands success of its subjects whilst depriving the majority of humanity the resources to do so. When pleasure is contingent on success within a system predicated on failure, the greatest resistance against pessimistic heteronormativity is the redefinition of pleasure and success through the lens of queer failure (Halberstam, 2011). Games, by their definition, are systems in which failure is an inevitability (Juul, 2016), but as Ruberg (2019) argues, this failure can serve as a site of resistance. This paper provides a new approach to the framework of queer failure in games by offering a reading using critical utopian (Moynan, 2000) thinking which enriches, and is enriched by, the queer art of failure. This paper questions how play, and the communities surrounding it, can introduce a utopian inclination to dystopian systems, counter to pessimistic, heterosexual nihilism epitomised in its extreme by incel culture. Examples offered include both video games (Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy) and tabletop games (The Quiet Year and The Deep Forest) that either question the notion of success through their mechanics (‘failing with the system’) or have proven to be sites of player-led resistance (‘failing against the system’) (Ruberg, 2019). By combining queer theory with utopian studies, this paper considers failure as a means of harnessing a utopian impulse in and through play, and explores its capacity to reconfigure neoliberal subjecthood by destabilising heteronormative ideas of what it means to succeed.

Gabe Elvery is a PhD researcher at the University of Glasgow theorising the Digital Fantastic. They are published in *First Person Scholar*, *Games and Culture*, *Springer* and *Poetic Sexploration the Anthology*. Their branching interactive narrative *I just want to remember*, and more information is available on their website: digital-fantastic.com

Francis Gene-Rowe is a Teaching Fellow in Global Media at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton. Their creative and research practices touch on queer ecology, analog game design, critical dystopia, sf poetry, speculative divination, Philip K. Dick, Ursula K. Le Guin, goblin futures, and more. Francis is co-director of the London Science Fiction Research Community and their recent publications include *Corroding the Now: Poetry and Science|SF* (Veer Books & Crater Press, 2023) and *Strange Realism* (Future Natures, 2024). <https://linktr.ee/francisgenerowe>



Gender tensions with boardgaming norms: inquiry into public encounters using board games in a French metropolitan area, Michael Freudenthal (Experice, Sorbonne Paris Nord)

French quantitative study Ludenquête (2016 ; Berry, Coavoux, 2021) showed three main social practices using board games, differentiated by sociabilities and games: playing in a family with children ; playing between adults with traditional games or classical edited board games like Scrabble or Trivial Pursuit ; and enthusiast “boardgamers” playing niche edited games, unknown to most, and engaging in specialized spaces offline and online. This practice involves mostly educated men below 40 years old, forming a socially and culturally homogeneous group (Berry, Roucoux, 2020), creating and being influenced by a common “play culture” (Brougère, 2024) of resources and norms. Our research suggests this play culture is found not only in boardgaming-focused events, but also spreads to more occasional players through direct interactions with players with some boardgamer play culture, or indirect interaction such as watching rule videos online. Furthermore, through analysis of the discourses linked to the boardgamer play culture (Barbier, 2022; Messina et al., 2023) and direct ethnographic observation of interactions enforcing its norms, our research turns to a gender lens (Bereni et al., 2008). Through gender, the boardgamer play culture can be correlated with masculinities relying on expertise and technicity, as described by Raewyn Connell (1995). The technical dimensions of the niche edited board games are highly valued while other dimensions are dismissed if they are too present in a game or game session, such as randomness or imagination. This contributes to explain previous research on women’s experiences of public boardgaming spaces (Davis, 2013 ; Pobuda, 2023) and show the limitations of research mostly based on online surveys and/or boardgaming-focused spaces. Eventually, taking into accounts these norms in action allow to “observe an unobservable” (Darmon, 2019, 2023), which can be useful to future research, design, and/or emancipatory play.

Michael Freudenthal is a PhD student at EXPERICE (university Sorbonne Paris Nord), supervised by Gilles Brougère and Vincent Berry, and partially funded by Asmodee through the Game in Lab program. They are researching the influence of fiction on participation and learning in leisurely board games, through an ethnographic methodology and a sociological perspective. E-mail: michael.freudenthal@gmail.com ; m.freudenthal@asmodee.com

‘NPC Roleplay as Disidentificatory Dissidence’, Rob Gallagher (King’s College)

For José Esteban Muñoz, disidentification is a queer performance strategy that enables toxic stereotypes to be reclaimed and ‘recycle[d...] as powerful and seductive sites of self creation’ (1999: 4). This paper uses Muñoz’s concept to analyse the forms of NPC roleplay that have recently gained popularity on platforms like TikTok. It reads NPC roleplay as a disidentificatory performance strategy, one that has allowed content creators to obey digital platforms’



imperatives while signalling their dissatisfaction with the gamified logics governing those platforms. NPC roleplay hit the headlines in the summer of 2023, as TikTok creators like Pinkydoll began assuming the role of videogame ‘non-player character’ in streams that saw them repeatedly rehearsing canned phrases and gestures in response to gifts from viewers. This craze marked a striking inflection point in the evolution of the NPC meme, one that saw the meme being reclaimed by exactly the kinds of individuals it had initially been used to disparage and harass. A product of alt-right imageboards, early NPC memes reflected the movement’s bigotries and biases. Some used the figure of the NPC to paint liberals and leftists as brainwashed drones; others deployed it to portray female Instagrammers as vapid and narcissistic. Even those posts, however, had contained glimmers of something more interesting: a critique of how digital platforms nudge, bribe and cajole all of us into behaving in accordance with their business models (Gallagher and Topinka, 2023). For O’Dwyer (2023), TikTok NPC streamers tease out this latent critique. In her reading, their eerily robotic performances dramatize the ways in which capitalism makes NPCs of all of us. By having human performers behave like AI-controlled automata, moreover, O’Dwyer contends that the genre prefigures a future where the forms of ‘emotional labour’ and ‘immaterial labour’ currently being undertaken by streamers are delegated to generative AI systems (Hochschild, 1979; Lazzarato, 1996). While this might seem like a dystopian prospect, O’Dwyer contends that we need not see it this way – and might instead interpret NPC roleplays as gestures toward a future where new technologies release us from dehumanising and ‘demeaning work’. Drawing on theories of digital labour, and on research into the gamification of sex work (Apperley, 2022; Tran, 2022), this paper takes up O’Dwyer’s provocation to unpack NPC roleplayers’ playfully ambivalent critiques of platformised labour.

Rob Gallagher is a lecturer in Games and Immersive Media at King’s College London. He is interested in gamer subjectivities, the expressive affordances of videogames as a medium, and the take-up of terms, concepts, aesthetics and practices derived from gaming culture in other cultural domains. He is the author of *Videogames, Identity and Digital Subjectivity* (Routledge, 2017) and the forthcoming *Artgames after GamerGate*.



Keynote Address, Hanne Grasmø

Hanne is a doctoral researcher at Centre of Excellency for Game culture studies, Tampere University. Her PhD-research centers around embodied role-play and sexual emotions, both in Nordic larp and in BDSM communities. Focus areas are role-play design, immersion, queer play and transformative play. Both personally and professionally she is interested in exploring borders, edges, brinks and unknown possibilities. Grasmø holds a MA in sociology, and have additional background from sexology, education, theatre and larp design. She has discussed and written about larp for more than 20 years, founded the Knutepunkt larp conferences, wrote the first book about Nordic larp (1998) and have recently published a monograph of her well know larp: “Just a little lovin’ larp script” (2021).

‘Queering the Language of Games: Linguistically Reimagining Ludic Intimacy’, Bea Livesey-Stephens (Abertay University)

The language of games is, at its core, deeply rule-based. What is a game without rules? In *The Rule Book: The Building Blocks of Games*, Jaakko Stenros & Markus Montola (2024) analyse what kinds of rules account for the construction of a game and how they work. Early in the text, they assert that over the years and across various fields of research, conceptualisations of games have agreed on “the centrality of rules to games”, and that “rules are seen as doing the work of ordering, containing, and constituting the game” (Stenros & Montola, 2024). I assert that in making sense of what game rules actually are, Stenros and Montola interrogate the language of games within interrogating their systems, structures, and mechanics, especially from their positions of scholars of queer play and pervasive games. I maintain that their interrogation encourages us, the players, to accept an invitation from Stenros & Montola to use the new language of rules from their analysis, so that we can more easily queer their systems and mechanics for our own benefit and reflection of what a game can do for us instead of what we can do for a game. If we think of rules as the syntax of a game, we can imagine them as deeply flexible, but that their existence is inherent, especially regarding the five different types of rules that Stenros & Montola posit. Avery Alder’s structural queerness invites us to “[challenge] the framework of how stories get told, and subverting systems through [queering] mechanics.” I maintain that in Stenros and Montola providing further language of rules, this give players the epistemic justice we need in order to understand how to queer our games in a way that works for us, and that with this language, we can systematically, mechanically, and linguistically queer games for the play we want, especially deconstructing the dominance of formal rules. I maintain that Stenros & Montola’s analysis of game rules arguably positions analogue games as inherently queer, especially through their auto/co-creative aspect. My paper fundamentally answers Stenros, Montola, and Alder with a games studies-linguistics lens of what queering the language of games means, and how it is a necessary step to queer and subvert systems, mechanics, and frameworks, and better understand how queer systems and a queer linguistics of games unlocks potential for transformative play and ludic intimacy.



Beatrix (Bea) Livesey-Stephens (she/her) is an MPhil candidate at Abertay University, where she researches player calibration in analogue intimacy games. She works at the intersections of linguistics, consent, sex and relationship education, accessibility, ethics, and creative collaboration in an attempt to map the limits of transformative play and ludic vulnerability for growth. She is particularly interested in using frameworks informed by asexual embodiment to better understand player calibration, consent, and ethics both in and beyond the play space. [e-mail b.livesey-stephens2200@abertay.ac.uk](mailto:b.livesey-stephens2200@abertay.ac.uk)

‘What’s all this then? A study of the link between game design practices, cultural representation and the potential for social interaction in co-located and hybrid play settings’, Lynn Love, Gaz Robinson and Kayleigh McLeod (Abertay University)

As video games rely upon player interaction, game designers have developed a range of approaches to introduce players to the game world, teaching them what to do, what their actions mean, what to value, what to avoid, and so on. This can be seen most prevalently within tutorials and on-boarding for games, but continues throughout in how the game rewards, directs, supports and challenges the player. The game design, in this way, influences player in-game behaviour and interaction. This influence can also extend beyond the game itself, into real-world actions. Most often, real world actions linked to video games are associated with negative real-world behaviours such as aggressive or anti-social behaviour, however, games have also been linked to positive social benefits (Przybylski A., and K. and Weinstein, 2019). This paper will examine the methods that game designers use to inform player behaviour considering specifically design for social play and community formation around and within a game. We begin with analysis of game design practices and their relationship to shaping player behaviour before considering the unique design opportunities presented by hybrid and co-located settings. This analysis frames the presentation of two case studies: Cumbraecraft, a cultural heritage hybrid video game and Whale Song Park, a public co-located video game installation. The case studies, written from a practitioner perspective, draw from player data and observations to discuss how reframing heritage, mirroring the real world in the digital, developing camaraderie, and leveraging expertise and competition, can shape collective player behaviour in the real world to promote social interaction and community formation. We also reflect on the challenges presented by public space in terms of safety, permission and power and how these alter the potential for games in these settings to form social bonds between players and the public. We propose that game design that considers how it engages players with culture (real or designed for the game) can promote co-located social interactions and the formation of temporary play communities.

Kayleigh MacLeod is a Doctoral Researcher and Lecturer at Abertay University. A BAFTA award-winning game artist, Kayleigh is an avid game developer and enthusiast of games that celebrate minority cultures, diversity, and accessibility. Kayleigh's research interests lie in the



beneficial factors that games can have in promoting and preserving cultural heritage and minority languages. She has presented her work at ECGBL, the Dundee Design Festival, and BBC Alba.

Dr Lynn Love is a lecturer in Computer Arts at Abertay University, a game designer and a member of the Young Academy of Scotland. Within Abertay Game Lab, she creates analogue and digital play experiences that examine the use of play to bring people together and has exhibited at DiGRA, CHI, BBC Click Live, and Edinburgh International Fringe. She is interested in video game play contexts, player participation in alternative festivals and is a director of Now Play This. Lynn is passionate about widening participation, equality, diversity and inclusion and explores this academically and as an associate at Play:Disrupt.

Gaz Robinson is a game developer and Lecturer at Abertay University. He is an enthusiastic builder of things; from game jams and collaborations with fellow academic staff, to the exploratory use of procedural content generation for building new gameplay experiences. He has a keen interest in platform and combat game design, satisfying mechanics and deep dynamics. Gaz is also a director of Biome Collective: a Dundee-based games and digital arts collective that explores the boundaries of digital media.

‘Dance upon the stars tonight: Queer Worldbuilding in Games’, Esther MacCallum-Stewart (Staffordshire University)

In recent years, science fiction and fantasy writing has seen a huge explosion in Queer Worldbuilding, with not just an emergence of LGBTQI+ characters, but the development of sustained worlds where their presence simply ‘is’. Increasingly, these worlds are not only popular but award winning. N.K Jemisin, Anne Leckie, Arkady Martine and Martha Wells have all taken Best Novel at the Hugo Awards, and queer worlds are becoming a core part of this century’s contribution to SFF literature. In games, queer worldbuilding has started to take its cue from this type of storytelling and is building LGBTQI+ cultures more strongly into its worlds. This goes beyond simply demonstrating representation through gay characters in any given game, and instead aims to present worlds where queerness is normative. This paper looks at some of these worlds, and examines the ways in which developers create these spaces through mechanics as well as narrative. By using different forms of avatar selection, emphasising specific aspects within advertising, and shifting the focus of transmedia texts, as well as narratives where romance is presented extensively through a non-heteronormative gaze, these games build worlds which are decidedly queer. I will also briefly examine the role of the player as an active participant in this, as someone able to use a creative destiny to shape the ways in which their own characters are played, or played with, in these spaces.

Professor Esther MacCallum-Stewart works on Games Studies at Staffordshire University, and is also the Chair of the 2024 Worldcon, where she fights off bad folk with her vision of Caring, Inclusion and Imagination. She has written extensively on player communities and queerness, as well as player narratives, gender and roleplaying.



‘How Allies can Address Representation’, Joe Macleod-Iredale (Manchester Game Centre)

Walking around the UK Games Expo, Essen Spiel or any other mainstream analogue game convention gives an overwhelming impression that players, and designers, are overwhelmingly white, cis, straight men. Whilst there is evidence that neurodivergence is prevalent in this sector, portrayals of women are frequently sexualised; people of colour are either missing or uncomfortable clichéd stereotypes, and queer representation is seemingly absent from mainstream offerings. I believe that there is little if any malice or intent in this homogeneity, it is rather the result of designers being oblivious to the concerns of those different from themselves and unmindful of the value of representation to marginalised groups. I am one of those white, cis, straight men, who both plays and designs board and card games. Over the past 18 months, I have been designing a Regency Matchmaking card game; I have struggled with how best to allow a diverse set of players to feel represented. I have asked queer friends for their opinions whilst knowing that asking for them to speak on behalf of all gay or trans people is not appropriate and potentially offensive, I have struggled with ethnic diversity and settled on including my friends in the game to reflect modern British diversity, and nervously wrote flavour text ‘easter eggs’ for queer people. My paper explores my experience to prompt a discussion about how best to sensitively represent queerness in games, especially for those who are straight.

Joe Macleod-Iredale has a background in furniture design. He is now an NWCDTP doctoral researcher at Manchester Metropolitan University, embarking on the third year of a PhD. His research investigates how analogue game-making can best be used as a teaching tool.

Gender Dysphoria and Euphoria in Queer Players’ Experiences, Mark Maletka (Tampere University)

Dysphoric and euphoric experiences are a part of self-determination journey for many gender diverse people. These experiences point to what goes in line with one’s perception of their gender and what falls out. Interaction with different people, things and environments allows navigating better in the person’s inner worlds, and video games stand out as one of tools to facilitate this navigation (McKenna et al., 2022). Nowadays queer game studies have mostly been focused either on narrative parts of video games (Howard, 2020; Látal, 2022), or on queerness as “non-normativity” (Hantsbarger et al., 2022; Ruberg, 2022) disconnected from queerness in players. And, although there are works that connect some parts of playing experience as avatar-creation (Griffiths et al., 2016; McKenna et al., 2022) to affirmation of gender identity, overall dysphoria and euphoria as parts of queer players’ experiences have remained understudied and need broader discussion summarizing the impact and pointing to player-game interaction. This



proposal discloses a part of results of the survey conducted from June 1st to October 31st, 2023, as a part of the dissertation project researching video game mechanics and diverse gender identities. The surveys were conducted in English (71 responses) and Ukrainian (45 responses), English-language one targeted at international LGBTQIA+ community and Ukrainian-language one focused on Ukrainian LGBTQIA+ representatives. Ukrainian players were chosen a target group because of significant differences in culture and social perception of gender diversity. The purpose of this individual proposal is to trace interactions and parts of playing experiences that survey participants mentioned as dysphoric or euphoric, as well as trace the environment-specific differences in the impact of video games on gender diverse players. The surveys included a question about gender dysphoria caused by interaction with video games and / or gaming communities. Gender euphoria was something that participants were regularly mentioning in their responses themselves. Two main topics were brought up by the survey participants in both contexts of gender dysphoria and euphoria, namely: affirmation / invalidation of gender identity by a video game itself (e.g., mechanics that allow or do not allow accommodating gender identities, validation of an assigned gender at birth or affirmation of one's gender identity) and affirmation / invalidation by gaming communities (e.g., 'accidental allies', genuine acceptance or rejection of one's gender identity). The symposium presentation will describe the results of the study focusing on differences between dysphoric and euphoric experiences of LGBTQIA+ players with different national backgrounds.

Mark Maletka (MPhil) is a Doctoral Researcher and PhD candidate at Tampere University. His dissertation research is focused on relationship between video game mechanics and gender identity self-discovery processes. Prior to current position, M. Maletka was a teacher of philosophy at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University, Ukraine. mark.maletka@tuni.fi

'Dissent through Play', Jess Metheringham (Dissent Games)

A workshop exploring the messages communicated through games, and how to use these to challenge norms and propose solutions. How can we speak truth to power through fun? Who are we targeting with games, and what are we trying to demonstrate? How do overall themes and specific game mechanics contribute to the message? Participants will discuss the different ways in which games can influence opinion, educate players, and build relationships.

Jessica Metheringham is a game designer and political campaigner. In 2019 she founded Dissent Games, making games on political and cultural themes. She is the Chair of Unlock Democracy, and campaigns on democratic issues including voter ID and restrictions on protest. She has previously worked in Parliament, for the Electoral Commission, and for Quakers in Britain. Her games include Disarm the Base (about the peace movement), Library Labyrinth (showcasing 60 women in history and literature) and the forthcoming Trickle Down (the economy).



Keynote Address, Gaspard Pelurson (King's College)

Focusing on personal anecdotes and reflections to drive the discussion, this talk will start by advocating for the desacralization/queering of intimate topics in conversations, promoting queer visibility without necessarily resorting to abrasive honesty in academia and the workplace. Moving into the realm of pedagogy, it will discuss the importance of disrupting traditional teaching methods by incorporating games into the classroom. Educators will be invited to reflect on their experiences implementing games and the challenges of creating engaging learning experiences within limited time frames. This speech will highlight the need for a dedicated game lab to facilitate more effective and organized gameplay sessions, drawing inspiration from the University of North Carolina's game lab. A critique of game spaces will follow, questioning the prevalence of repetitive tropes and artistic coherence in video game environments. The audience will be invited to participate in the discussion focusing on the emotional impact of games and virtual spaces. This will lead to the exploration of the potential for protest in, beyond, and around games, and the building of stronger connections.

Gaspard grew up in France and Belgium and first obtained his BA in English Studies at the University of the Sorbonne-Nouvelle (Paris III). He then completed his Masters in English Literature at the University of Cambridge in 2012 and MA in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Sussex in 2013. While working as a Doctoral Tutor and a Research Associate at the University of Sussex, he received his doctorate in Media and Cultural Studies in 2018. He started as a Lecturer in Media at Leeds Beckett University from 2019 to 2022 and retains fond memories of the North. Gaspard serves on the editorial board of *Convergence and Continuum*. His first monograph, *Manifestations of Queerness in Video Games*, explores the integration of video games with queer culture, including drag, cyborgs, sissies, flânerie, monsters, and the latent homoeroticism found in wrestling. His primary research interests lie at the intersection of queer and game studies. Drawing from cultural studies, game theory, gender studies, and queer theory, his work views games as a multifaceted medium and a platform for critical societal reflections. Of particular interest are alternative and 'deviant' gaming experiences, the mapping of game spaces, and the interplay between gaming and everyday life practices. Gaspard's contributions have been featured in journals such as *Game Studies*, *Continuum*, or *Convergence*, as well as various edited collections.

'Sexuality and Romance Without Borders(?): Exploring the Queerness of Mechanical Bisexuality in RPGs', David Popelka (University of Manchester)

This paper critically examines the mechanics of sexuality in role-playing games (RPGs), particularly focusing on mechanical bisexuality. Mechanical bisexuality, an unbounded mechanic allowing players to engage in romance narratives with characters of any gender, raises questions about its role in queering traditional notions of sexuality within RPGs. Through an analysis of the mainstream series *Dragon Age* (2009–2014) by BioWare and the indie series *My*



Time At (2019–2023) by Pathea, this paper addresses such questions. While the mechanic initially promises to provide a unique platform for exploring the fluidity of sexuality and challenging conventional norms, the mechanic in the examined titles leads to a paradox. Despite offering boundless freedom in romantic interactions, these games often fail to substantially queer their narratives and relationship mechanics; for instance, the player is supposed to date just one character. Furthermore, these games rather utilise mechanical bisexuality to cater to both heterosexual and homosexual audiences without fully engaging with their queer potential. As a result, mechanical bisexuality leads to a limited gaming experience while promising freedom of choice. Based on these findings, the paper concludes by discussing how players address the constraints of mechanical bisexuality through mods. The paper further suggests re-evaluating the game mechanics of sexuality in RPGs to create a more inclusive gaming experience that starts with mechanical bisexuality but pushes beyond normative boundaries.

David Popelka is a postgraduate student pursuing research in Gender, Sexuality, and Culture at the University of Manchester. His scholarly endeavours have centered on exploring the representation of male-male sex and romance across diverse media platforms, including literature, cinema, and computer games. During his undergraduate studies at the University of York, David conducted an in-depth investigation into the portrayal of male-male sex in mainstream young adult literature, culminating in the completion of a first-class bachelor's thesis. Currently, as part of his postgraduate studies, David is focusing on examining male romantic relationships and sexuality in popular role-playing games.

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‘Times of Waste, Wastes of Time: The Queer Potentiality of “too much” Play’, Hollie Wistow (University of Nottingham)

In this presentation I explore how play can pose a queer challenge to the politics of efficiency and futurism. Queerness is bound to waste through its opposition to future-orientated reproductive heteronormativity (Edelman, 2004). At the same time, play can be understood as a queer act through its anti-productive place in players lives (Gotez, 2018). Drawing on data from semi-structured interviews with videogame players I address how play was temporally framed (how much they played and when) in subjects' lives and was implicated not only by their play habits but also by wider rhythms and routines of work, marriage, and reproduction. By the logic of a heteronormative capitalist social economy players “should” be working, having children, and living the supposed “good life”. Many players in interviews coincided with these expectations and their play was “just enough” where it did not disturb or disrupt the normative rhythms of their everyday lives. At the same time, in interviews participants also constructed a temporality of “too much” play. This form of play was vilified and cast onto an imaginary subject of the excessive gamer. Whilst the excessive gamer did not tangibly exist, they acted as a cautionary tale of what happens when you do not monitor or contain your videogame play. Players illustrated that “too much” play leads to a body that ingests its wasteful and unhealthy qualities, creating an image of an obese and abject subject. Instead of working, finding a partner or getting a job, the player



who played “too much” was figured by delay and disruption towards normative life trajectories. They were “gross”, “unhealthy” and “unwelcome” in the conventional spaces of everyday life. These players did not grow up, get a job, or have children, (nor did it appear that they ever would). Instead, they excessively played videogames. In this presentation I unpack this image of “too much” in more detail, focusing on their wider implications to narratives of productivity and waste. Ultimately, I argue that the excessive gamer illustrate how play when figured by waste can queer methods of being that potentially disrupts hegemonic power structures in and around videogame play.

Hollie Wistow is a doctoral researcher at the University of Nottingham in the department of Culture, Media, and Visual Studies. Her PhD is in Critical Theory and Cultural studies, and her primary focus lies at the intersection between at queer and game studies. Through ethnographic research methods, she explores the "queer" potentialities that can arise in time and space during videogame play. Email: lqyhrw@nottingham.ac.uk

‘Thanatos and Eros in action-adventure games: the homoerotic queering of the gamer habitus?’, Feng Zhu (King’s College)

Jonathan Dollimore (1998, p. xvii) writes that at the heart of Western culture there lies a contradiction wherein desire is “destructively insatiable” and “self-defeating”; it is “a permanent lack whose attempted fulfilment is at once the destiny of the self and what destroys it”. This connection can be particularly evident in homoerotic representation in art and literature. The tragic death of young heroes accentuates the brevity of their lives, the beauty (*kalos kagathos*) of their deeds, and underscores the destruction of the beautiful. In *The Aeneid*, the death of Euryalus is described as the moment when he droops forward, like “a blood-red flower, cut by a plow”, to the anguish of his lover Nisus. If Bataille (1986 [1962], p. 19) has remarked that passion that is fulfilled provokes such violent agitation that the pleasure experienced can be so great as to be like its opposite – suffering, then St Sebastian’s penetration by arrows (Jarman, 1976) and Antaeus’s struggles in Heracles’ crushing embrace (Simons, 2008) can be seen to be ambivalent between agony and ecstasy. Many characters in action-adventure games often resemble classic heroes and have been designed with a view to eliciting the player’s desire or admiration. Yet whilst it has been remarked that there is a wilful omission of representing explicit sexual practices (Krzywinska, 2012), the relationship between death (or gamic ‘failure’) and its eroticism, particularly as it pertains to the playable character, is one that is arguably understudied. The fantasy of heteronormative inviolability of the playable character in perfect playthroughs, in which the hero breaks apart (penetrates) the bodies of his opponents whilst remaining untouched himself, provides a stark contrast to *gyaku ryona* scenarios (see: Pelurson, 2023), in which the player-controlled male character submits to the repeated attacks of male assailants until the game ends. Such a ‘surrender’ of one’s character (in *gyaku ryona*) is arguably a “counter-conduct” (*contre-conduite*) (Foucault, 2007, p. 193) that queers the conventional “gamer habitus” (Kirkpatrick, 2012), which is premised on the player’s embodied acquisition of techniques for evading and countering attacks, on achieving gamic victory. However, it is also



significant that the player, rather than being merely passive, must actively engineer and manoeuvre their character into the desired situation. To do this calls for the exercise of a rich set of competences in pursuit of a desired end; it ill befits Halberstam's (2020) "queer failure". Such scenarios have often been meticulously engineered by players so that the right costume has been equipped for the character, the correct move(s) performed to initiate the sequence, the most suitable camera angle chosen, or mod installed, etc. In contrast to the distillation of a story to a climactic moment in sculpture or painting, such a gamic choreography is one where players 'inhabit' or are actively "incorporated" (Calleja, 2011) into the procedurally unfolding action in complex ways. Even where these scenarios were accidentally encountered rather than consciously engineered, the demise of the hero in such unsuccessful playthroughs nevertheless occupies a queer unconscious that is blotted out with successive play attempts. In this talk, through analysing gyaku ryona videos of the Devil May Cry and Ninja Gaiden series, I explore the ways in which play in action-adventure games may be seen to contain a latent relationship between Thanatos and Eros, one that is tied to the ergodic nature of the medium and those branching pathways that have "no future" (Edelman, 2020).

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