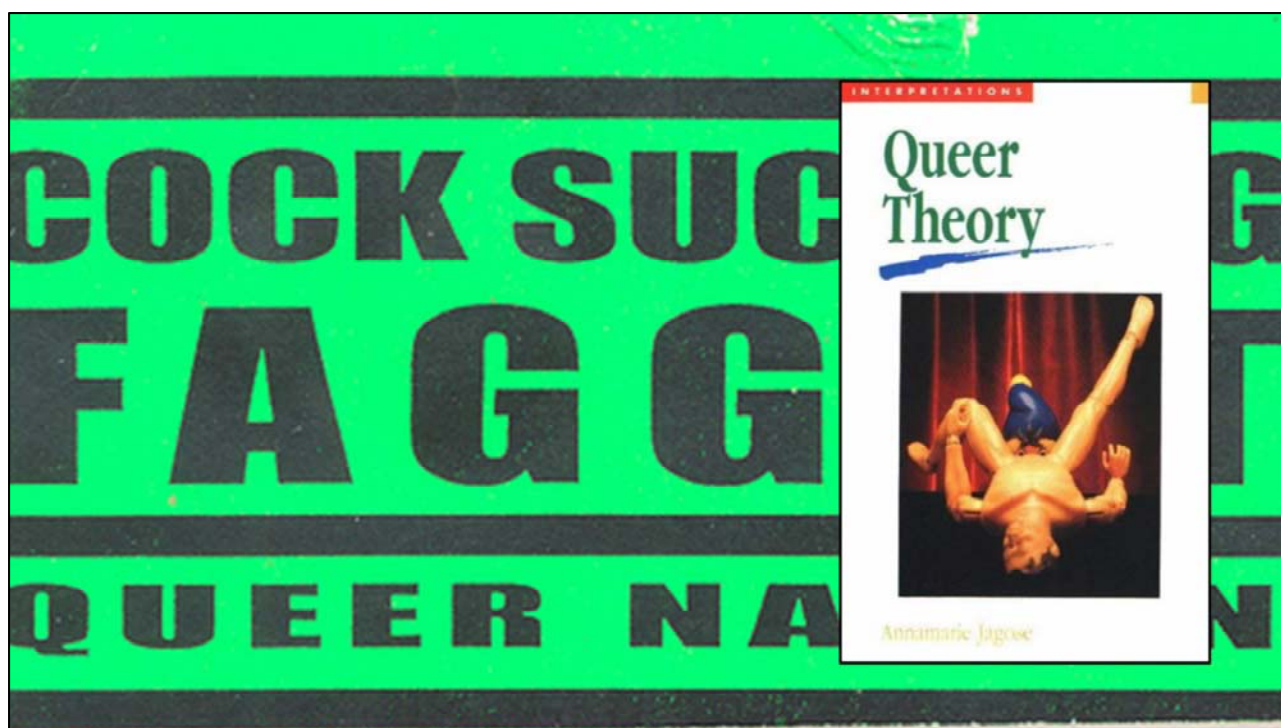


NAOMI: Like a lot of the speakers here at QGCon, we're going to use the word queer, but Merritt and I want to use that word in a very particular way. It might be easiest to think of that usage as the "verb" use of queer, and think about what it means to "queer" something -- specifically, we want to give you some of our thoughts on the nature of the relationship between human beings and games, in the past and present, in the stories we tell about games and the way they shape us, what assumptions we make about human-game relations and how we might be able to queer them.



So here we go: my first memories of the word "queer" are of this sticker, created and distributed by Queer Nation in the early 90s, during the height of the AIDS crisis. I was in high school at the time; I'd helped start a small sex-education coalition with two of my friends. We got ahold of a packet of educational materials and condoms from our local chapter of ACT UP, a packet that included some of these stickers. We distributed the condoms, but we had no idea what to do with all these "cock sucking faggot" stickers. We were like "whoa..." and we knew that this was pretty bad-ass and confrontational, and that we would definitely get in trouble if any adults saw them. We were familiar with being called lesbos, or fags, or dykes; but the word "queer" had a more unfamiliar tang to it -- older, stranger. So we watched with a little bit of awe as groups like Queer Nation reclaimed it.



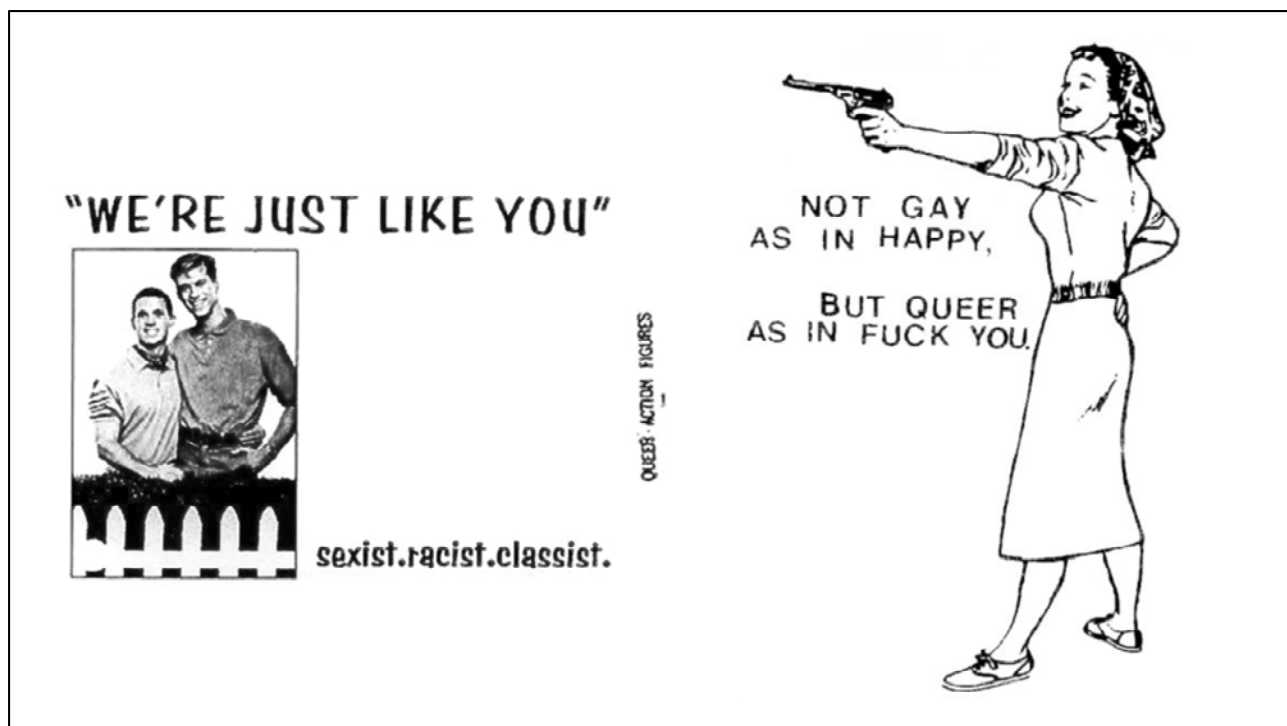
This was the book, by Annamarie Jagose, that convinced me to start using the word "queer" for myself, a decade later. It's a simple primer on queer theory, including the history and uses of the word. When I read it, I realized with growing excitement that queer wasn't JUST a slur that had been reclaimed and transformed into a proud badge -- it was, at least potentially, a word that was in a constant process of mutation, inherently unfixed. Like a lot of queers, I was looking for a word that described me -- that somehow encompassed the different-than-expected tangle of my gender, my sexuality, the ways I use and make my body. "Queer," as I understood it, dealt with these dilemmas by being a relentlessly unfixed signifier -- not just available for reinterpretation and redeployment, but by insisting on standing for what's outside, still unintelligible, not part of an orderly system. "Queer," to me, was an escape hatch from any number of entrenched, definitive narratives, into a mode of existence that has to keep asking questions of naturalized norms. I was probably putting too much on a single word, making it into a lifeline; but there is something about the origins of queer's slipperiness -- the questioning of heteronormativity along its balancing counterpart, homonormativity -- that still appeals to me.



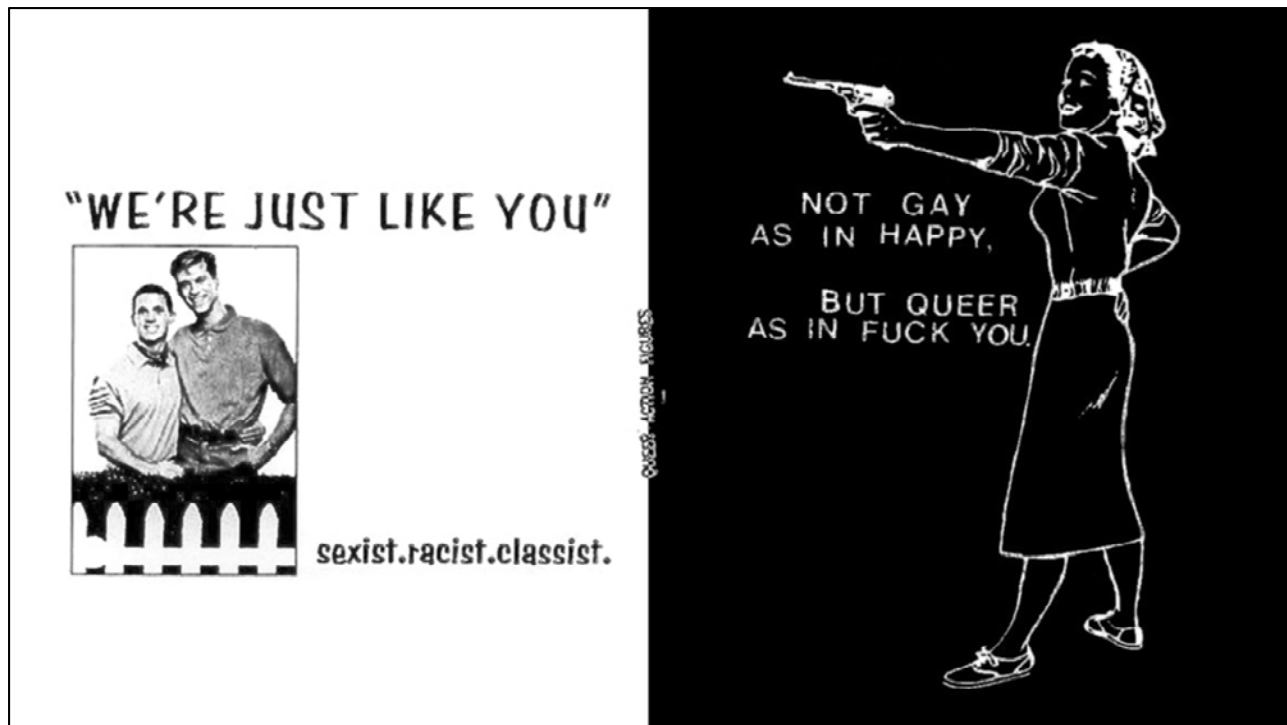
And just in case anyone's not clear, the usage of "queer" I'm talking about here is NOT the queer that's simply a descriptive umbrella, a substitute for acronyms like LGBT or QUILTBAG. It's a more political term with a specific stance: any sexual/gender minority is potentially queer, but not all of us are; it's a mantle that you have to specifically take up.



Queer is evanescent, like trying to hold a soap bubble. Grab it firmly, press on it, and it vanishes as other versions of the same soap bubble float by. As the life experiences of queer people shift over generations, new normals are created, the locus of queer shifts as well. It's moving, floating -- an unstable identity that we can't quite define, and so it doesn't quite define us either. That's one reason I favor it; the other is that since it's inextricably bound up with the idea of resisting dominant, naturalized narratives and categories, queer comes with a politic.



This politic has often been framed in opposition to a more mainstream gay-rights politic, in opposition to the drive to assimilate as valuable members of society rather than question assumptions and underpinnings. Queer is not about the kind of movement concerned more with gay marriage above all else, not about putting "gays in the military" above the less photogenic struggles of people who face other oppressions at the same time as homophobia. When I started identifying as queer and first found queer community, this was the dichotomy I found, and it was pretty clear to me, as someone who believes in struggles for racial & economic justice, where my own politics fit in.



But I want to be really clear that divergent uses of "queer" don't need to lead us into yet another binary. As impossible as it may sound to some people, we can acknowledge that the well-financed lobby for gay marriage really has pushed middle-of-the-road perceptions and improved lives for many people, while ALSO insisting that we need to ask bigger, deeper questions about what the normative model of relationships and families are.

beyondmarriage.org

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Beyond Same-Sex Marriage: A New Strategic Vision For All Our Families and Relationships

Executive Summary ([click here to read the full statement](#))

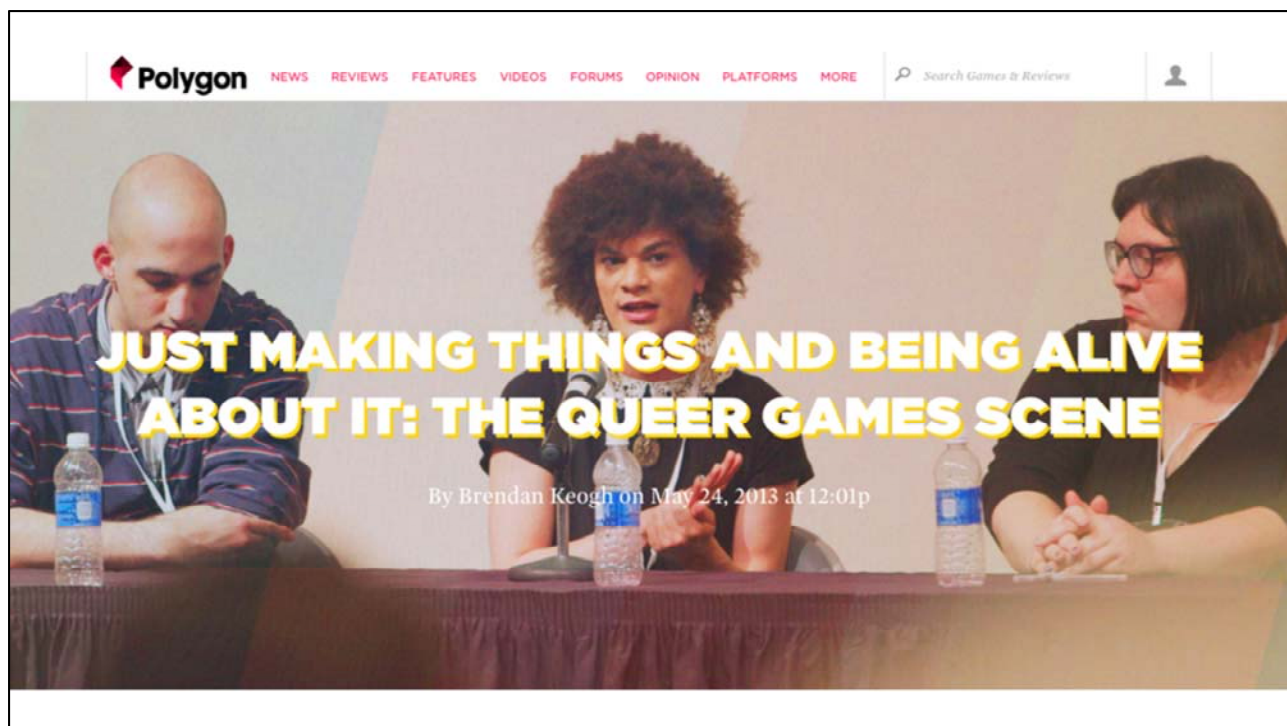
The time has come to reframe the narrow terms of the marriage debate in the United States. Conservatives are seeking to enshrine discrimination in the U.S. Constitution through the Federal Marriage Amendment. But their opposition to same-sex marriage is only one part of a broader pro-marriage, "family values" agenda that includes abstinence-only sex education, stringent divorce laws, coercive marriage promotion policies directed toward women on welfare, and attacks on reproductive freedom. Moreover, a thirty-year political assault on the social safety net has left households with more burdens and constraints and fewer resources.

Meanwhile, the LGBT movement has recently focused on marriage equality as a stand-alone issue. While this strategy may secure rights and benefits for some LGBT families, it has left us isolated and vulnerable to a virulent backlash. We must respond to the full scope of the conservative marriage agenda by building alliances across issues and constituencies. Our strategies must be visionary, creative, and practical to counter the right's powerful and effective use of marriage as a "wedge" issue that pits one group against another. The struggle for marriage rights should be part of a larger effort to strengthen the stability and security of diverse households.

That's my understanding of why the radical-queer "Beyond Marriage" statement uses the word beyond, and not "against." The slippery tension of defining the word "queer" can help us keep these thoughts and modes of seeing in tension with each other -- holding different ideas in different hands without being overwhelmed by cognitive dissonance -- indeed, through embracing dissonance and complexity instead. This is especially true in games, where we see some similar tensions come up -- does "queerness in games" refer primarily to inclusion and representation of queer voices and characters? Or to a deeper method or intent to question the structure and assumptions of games? The answer, unsurprisingly, is "yes," especially in an age when a whole lot of marginalized, multiply-oppressed queer creators are doing both at the same time. The challenge, I think, is to not let the more obvious, photogenic, traditional solutions eclipse or pull focus from the trickier, slipperier structural questions.



MERRITT: So let's dig deeper into the question of queerness and games. historically most conversations around the topic have centered around narrative and representational content. the presence of queer characters and relationships has been a focal point for both fans hungry to see characters they can identify with and reactionary commentators desperate to keep what they see as 'politics' out of games. series like fable, mass effect, and dragon age have gained tremendous amounts of attention -- both positive and negative -- for the inclusion of same-sex romance options.



by late 2012 and early 2013, critics were proposing the birth of a 'queer games scene' centering on oakland, california. many of the artists named as members refused the label, pointing to broad networks of creators informing one another's works. these works shared a number of features: they were queer narratives in that they were messy and nonlinear, rather than solely including queer characters; they were produced by queer-identified authors, often living in poverty and without traditional design or programming training; and they rejected the traditional forms and genres of videogames. the multiplicity of this supposed scene or movement opened up a series of conversations around what the term 'queer games' actually meant, pushing discussions beyond a focus on queer narrative content in mainstream titles.

so, if queerness in games isn't solely about representations or author identities, then what is it? around this time, a number of artists, scholars, and critics began talking about queer mechanics -- the idea that a game's rules, rather than just its imagery, could encode queerness or -- more often, heteronormativity.

taking a mechanical or rules-based approach to queerness is harder than looking at narrative for many of us because while it's easy to look for the presence or absence of same-sex relationships and queer characters, it's not as easy to pin down what exactly a queer mechanic looks like. this problem is compounded by the fact that queer studies emerged as a north american scholarly discipline mainly out of literary and media studies departments, which are often concerned with the reading of texts and representations. this is further compounded by the fact that a rules-focused

approach to games has recently been associated with a specific school of formalist inquiry that has been resistant to and sometimes directly antagonistic towards queer approaches.

so what does actually constitute a queer mechanic or form of play?



some scholars like colleen macklin argue that games themselves are inherently queer because play provides a safe space for failure -- and indeed, many games emphasize repeated failure as a part of a learning process. this approach echoes broader trends in queer studies that seek to unpack and rehabilitate the experience of failure more broadly.



on the other hand, miguel sicart's work has argued that a focus on games is misguided and that we should attend to play in itself, as a space of possibilities that resists and potentially subverts the goals and paths set in place by game designers. while sicart's approach doesn't name queerness specifically, we can set it in contrast with macklin's: here queerness resides not in failure within the confines of the game's rule system, but in playing with, testing, and perhaps even rejecting those rules themselves.



. sicart's work is aligned here with paolo pederchini's, who points to the ways in which most games reproduce capitalist mindsets through the encouragement of efficiency-minded gameplay.

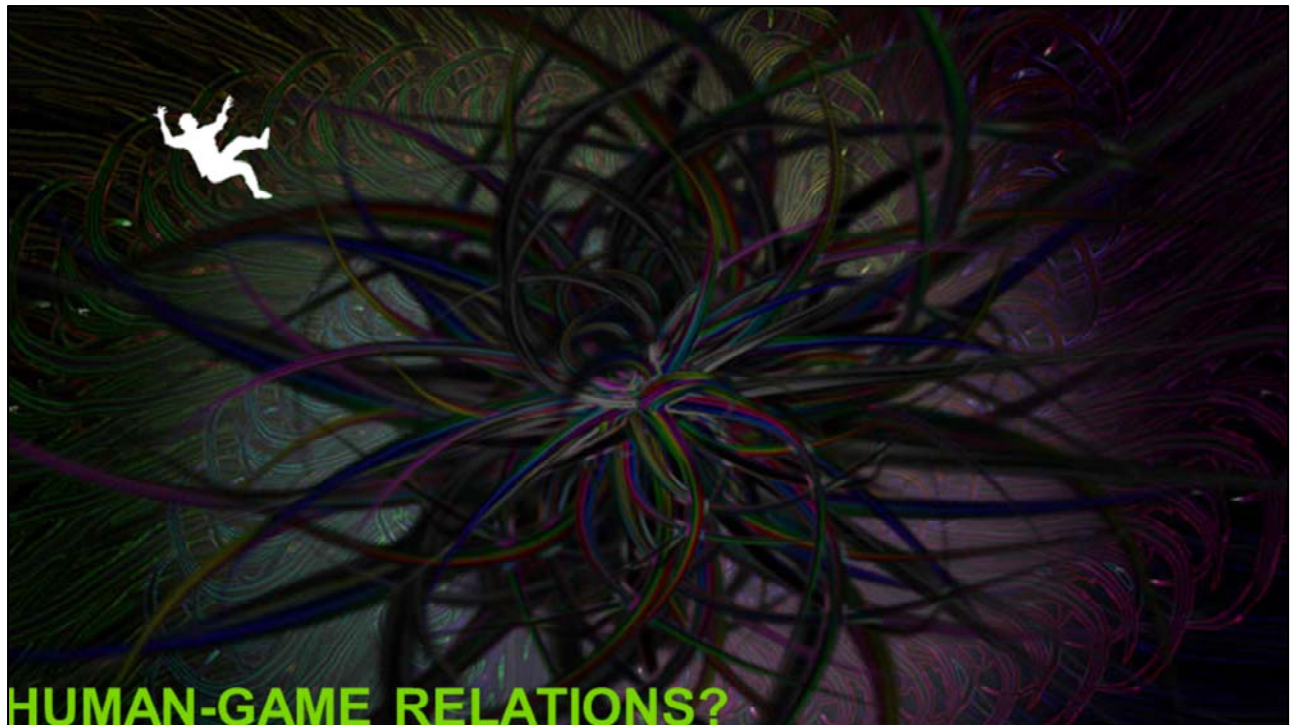


designers like avery mcdaldno and myself have argued for the consideration of the ways in which specific mechanics, like statistics or character ownership in role-playing games, can reinforce heteronormative dominant values. meaningfully intervening in games thus means considering queerness at a granular level by implementing mechanics that challenge oppressive values. this could look like denying players ownership of a single character that grows in power over time, or creating nonrepresentational spaces for the player to explore in a first-person game.



finally, edmond chang has raised the question of whether digital games can even meaningfully be queer when we consider the inherently binary structuring of all such works. his work, and that of robert yang, points to how rarely conversations around queerness and difference in games delve to the level of code.

the upshot of all of this is that, as most of you probably know by now, representation and author identities are limited means of looking at queerness in games. but even if we agree to examine mechanics and rules, the structure of games themselves, it's not immediately clear where we should look for queerness, or what it would entail for games. there are a lot of compelling and fruitful approaches to this question, and we've described a few. but for now, instead of examining games and poking around in their pulsing tissues to find evidence of queerness, we instead want to refocus on our relationship to games and play.

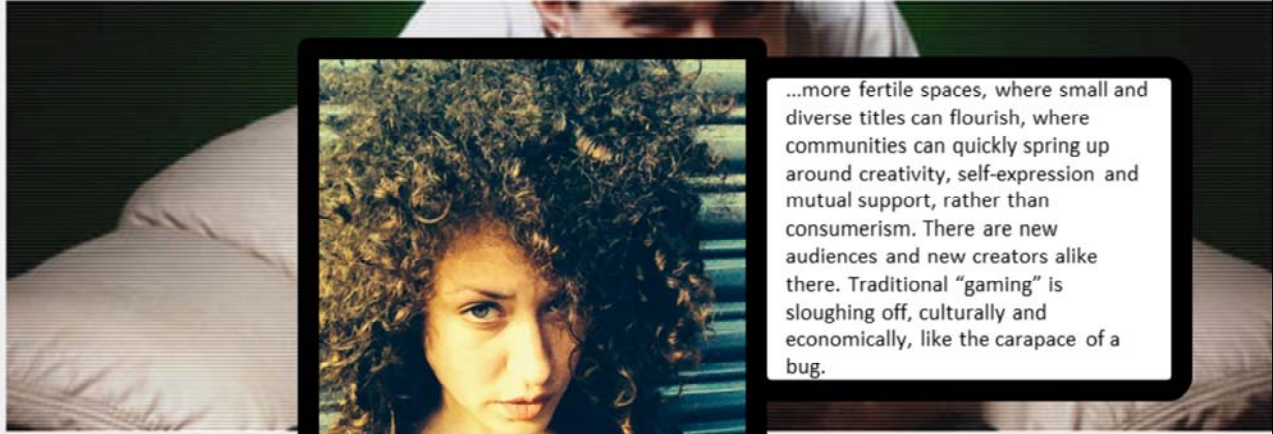


NAOMI: What do we mean by "human-game relations" and how would we queer those relations? To get at that, I'm going to have to tell a story that purports to be a history of games, or at least just one history. Hopefully, it's not just one of those highly unqueer stories of history-as-progress: technology improved and games get better and better, more realistic, bigger audiences and budgets! Instead, I'm going to deploy the second and third most-overused modes of framing history -- as cyclical recurrence, and as an ongoing dialectic struggle. I'm also going to start at the end, maybe as a way of admitting my own motive to try and understand how the hell we got to where we are now. So, what is the end, the current death-knell apocalypse? Of course, it is...



...Gamergate. Gamergate, as noted by critic Liz Ryerson, can be viewed as an anguished cry against a feeling of being rejected or unwanted by society, coming out of an adolescence of alienation. So much rage in the infantile screaming of gamergate has to do with a feeling of being persecuted AS a gamer, and a lashing out against anything that feels like a negative stereotype of gamer culture, as backwards, violent, misogynist escapism. The "gamer identity" being defended has hardened around cherishing games as a comfort zone where gamers can do and say anything they want without being criticized, without having to think about sexism, and without any girls in the clubhouse save those who tacitly agree not to make a fuss or raise their voices. Games, they insist, are fine just as they are, and negative images of gamers are not only incorrect, but also persecution of an oppressed identity.

'Gamers' don't have to be your audience. 'Gamers' are over. EXCLUSIVE



...more fertile spaces, where small and diverse titles can flourish, where communities can quickly spring up around creativity, self-expression and mutual support, rather than consumerism. There are new audiences and new creators alike there. Traditional "gaming" is sloughing off, culturally and economically, like the carapace of a bug.

I often say I'm a video game
I don't know exactly what that means. 'Game culture'
as we know it is kind of embarrassing -- it's not even

28, 2014 | By Leigh Alexander

253 comments

But the very articles that Gamergate was so enraged by at the end of August were also trying to rehabilitate the image of the gamer -- by showing the rest of the world that this "socially inept white guy" stereotype is wrong and obsolete. The difference is that the gamergate side thinks this common-sense notion of "gamer" should be discarded without any change happening at all, while proponents of greater political consciousness and inclusivity in games want to defy the common-sense notion BY making change. So you get what looks like internecine warfare, at least to people outside games--despite the fact that everyone's talking about how great it would be if the stereotypical notion of "gamers" could be left behind. Sadly, Gamergate itself provides the best case for why we haven't reached that point yet.



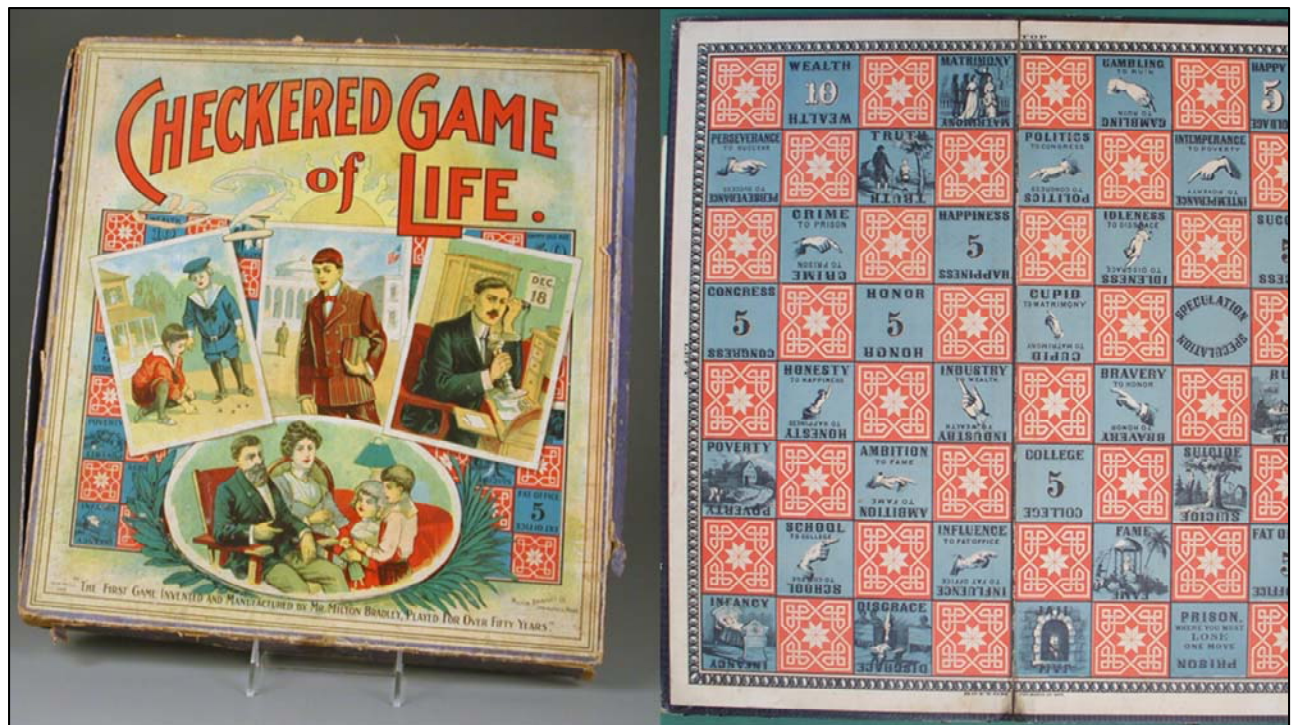
This struggle to overcome conventional wisdom about games is hardly new, of course. In the 90s, during the height of the industry's obsession with high-rez graphical fidelity, it took the form of complaints about lurid and realistic depictions of violence, in Jack Thompson's crusade against Grand Theft Auto. Back then we also saw advocates of games take two different tacks: defenders of gaming's status quo angrily rejected any attempt to problematize violence, while those who sought broader horizons for games pointed out that there WERE plenty of non-violent games and there could be many more. At this point, with a proliferation of innumerable kinds of games, it's clear that the latter reaction won out. In the 80s, the demonization of games was more focused on Satanism in fantasy settings and tabletop roleplaying; the industry reacted by putting far less emphasis on demon summoning.



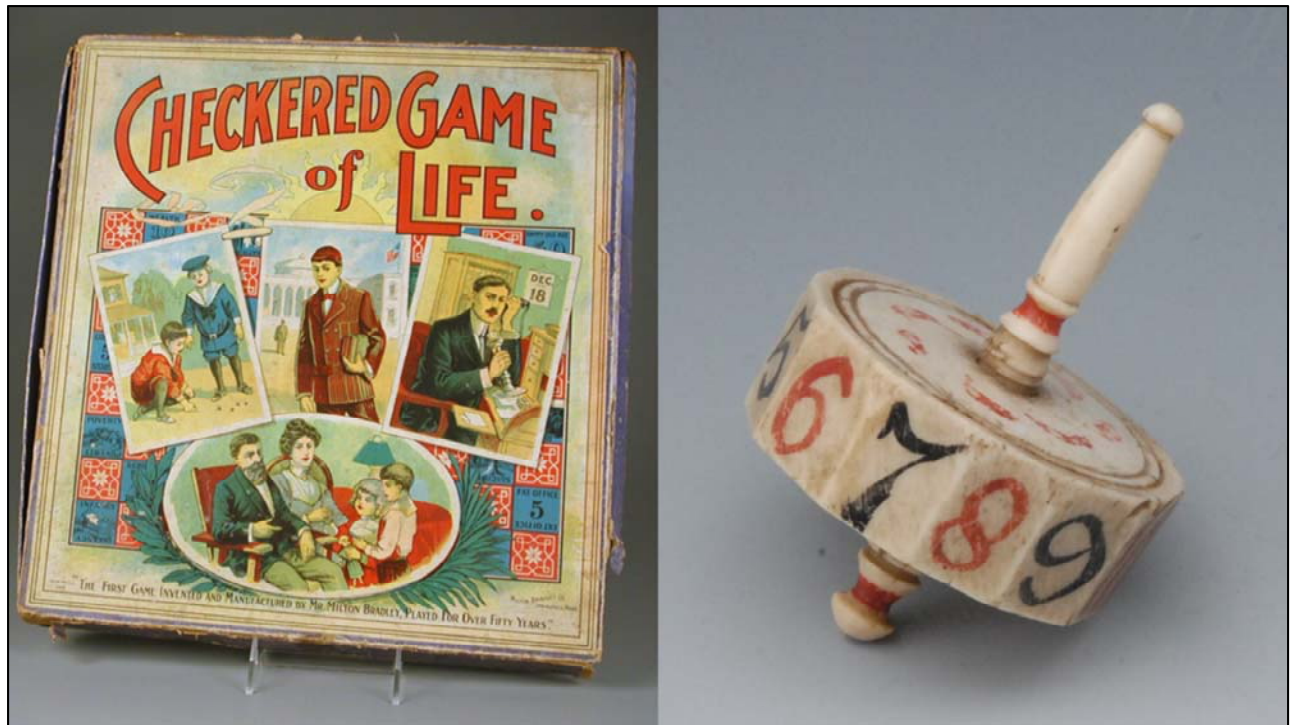
But we can go back much further. This spring, at Indiecade East, Julia Keren-Detar gave an illuminating talk about the history of board games that pointed out an earlier attempt to rehabilitate games. In the middle of the nineteenth century, games in the English-speaking world were heavily associated with gamblers and immorality.



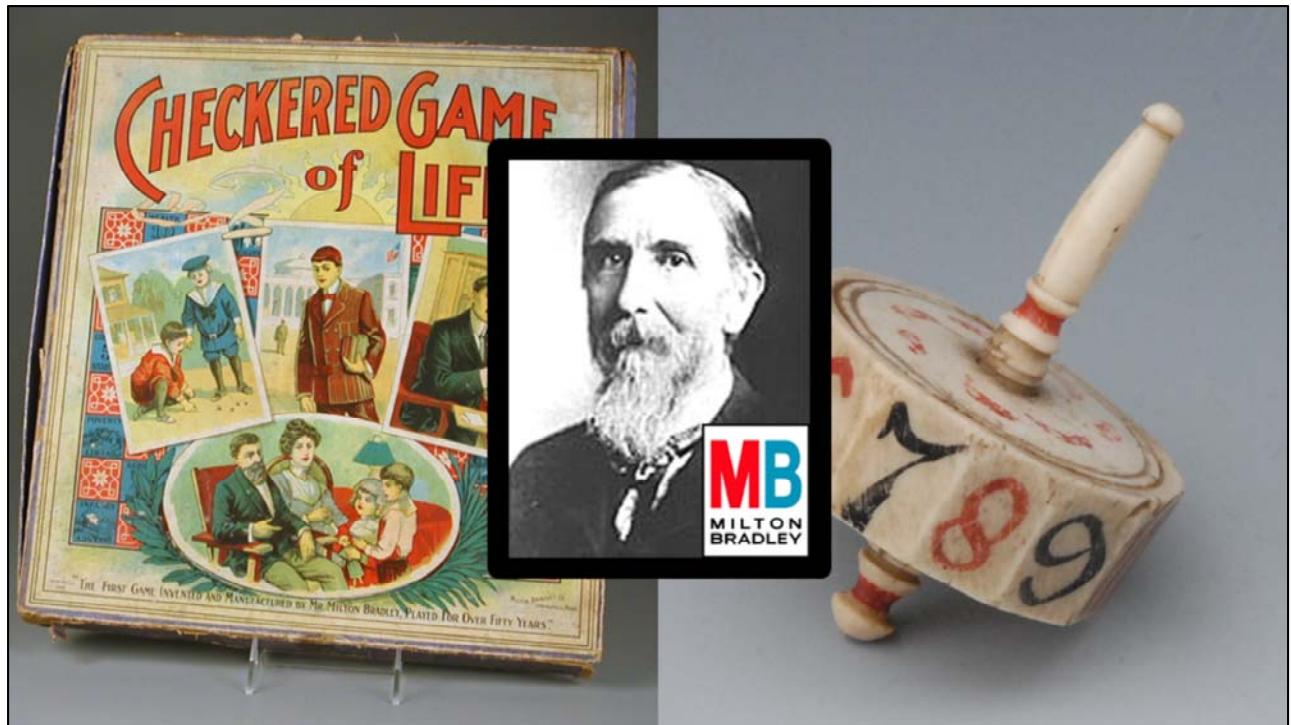
But industrialization and urbanization spurred growth of leisure time -- at least among the middle class -- and created an opportunity for a new entertainment product, something for families to do with each other at home. Early boardgames like the Mansion of Happiness were marketed as socially responsible games that taught children about Christian sins and virtues.



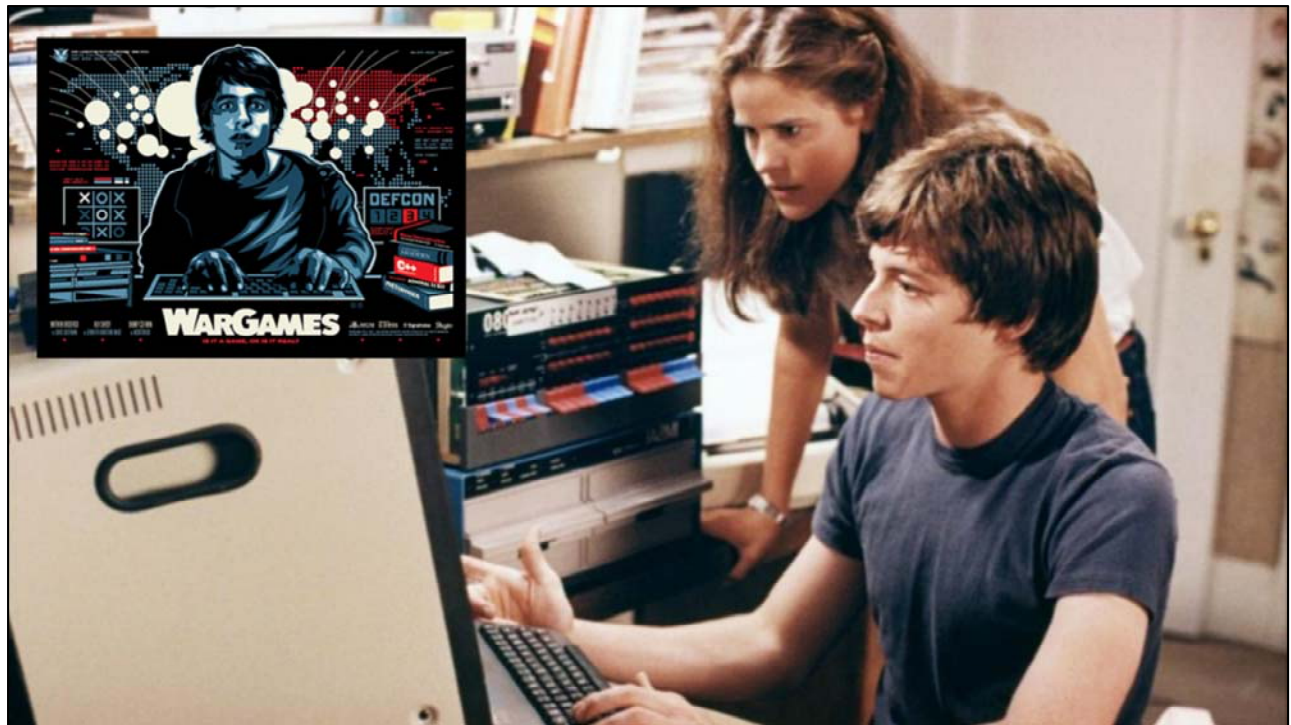
Not long after, games like The Checkered Game of Life spun this in a more secular direction, promoting worldly values like going to college, getting rich, and getting married. It's worth noting that these designers borrowed the basic idea of a morally instructive game, down the structure itself, from a very old Indian tradition that includes games like Snakes and Ladders.



These games faced a significant marketing problem: dice, were associated with gambling, not with teaching children proper virtues. So this game's designer adopted a less familiar ancient random-number generator: the teetotum, which later evolved into the plastic spinners of 20th century boardgames. This seems to have been a successful and highly profitable attempt to rehabilitate the image of games, since you may recognize the name of the game's designer: ..



...Milton Bradley. So games lost the image of simply being a pastime for soldiers, drunks, and thieves and became a mainstay of family and home life in the 20th century. Games were for kids and families!



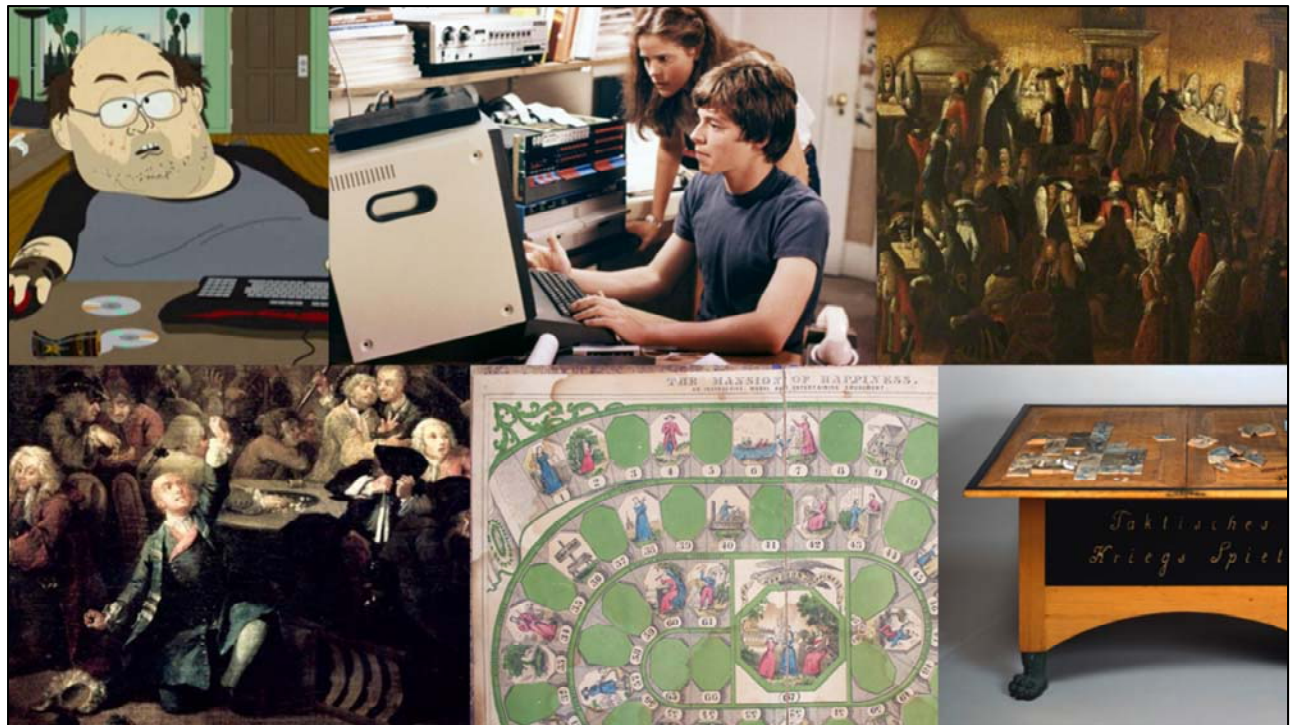
Of course, this image changed drastically when another kind of even-more-productive and profitable use was found for games: as torch-bearers and drivers of computing technology. Computers undoubtedly opened the way for a gigantic increase in the complexity of games. Suddenly game enthusiasts weren't just odd hobbyists obsessed with complicated versions of a children's pastime, they were early adopters, technological whiz kids, young men who could somehow master these new amazing machines and get them to bend to their will.



We can look at different points in Western history and see other instances of the drive to rehabilitate games, to make them more "useful for society." At the turn of the 17th century, gambling had become incredibly popular in Italy, especially among the wealthy classes -- for opportunities to drink, gossip, and rake profits from each other. The Catholic Inquisition was unsuccessful in trying to stamp out private gambling, so instead they opened the first casino, the Ridotto in Venice, as a legitimized, controlled, government-funded form of gaming -- at least for the upper classes, since although technically a public institution open to anyone, the casino had a strict dress code that effectively prohibited all but the wealthy.



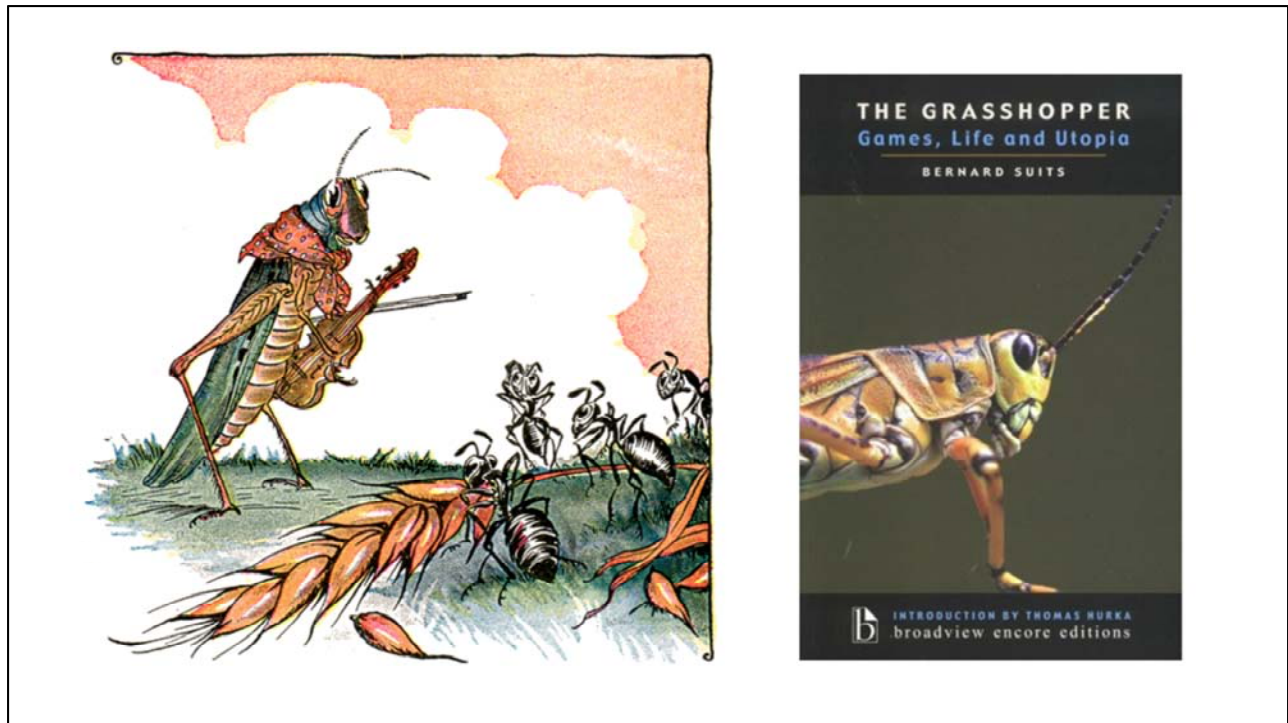
At around the same time as family board games were being created to teach morals, another kind of instructive board game also emerged from combined soldiers' games of dice with the charts and maps used by their generals to plan warfare. Kriegsspiel was a game designed as a training tool for officers to learn about strategy. The rules and format for this game were the prototype for all later strategy wargames, a genre that eventually gave birth to a mutant baby: Dungeons & Dragons, the first roleplaying game.



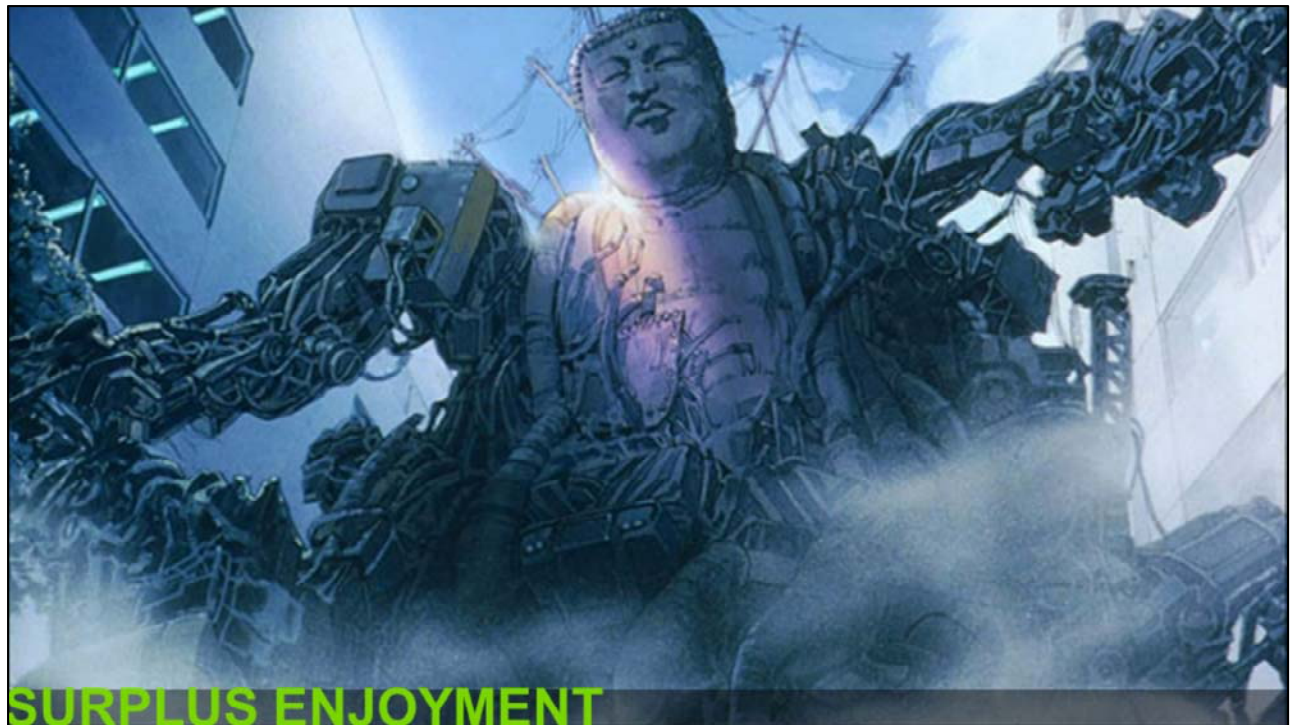
So, what's going on with this tension? Why have games constantly shuttled back and forth between these two images: social institutions and conventional wisdom have often given games a side-eye as possibly dangerous or at the very least regard them as a relatively unimportant waste of time or something meant only for children. Then we see outbursts in which games find a new place, a new purpose or productive role in society, often in conjunction with bigger social and economic shifts -- the dawn of the casino in Italy has been linked to the rise of banking institutions, the rise of board games can be seen as emerging from industrialization, the creation of the strategy wargame as part and parcel of warfare becoming more scientific, professionalized. Most recently, of course, we can't ignore the cataclysmic advent of computing technology and video games.



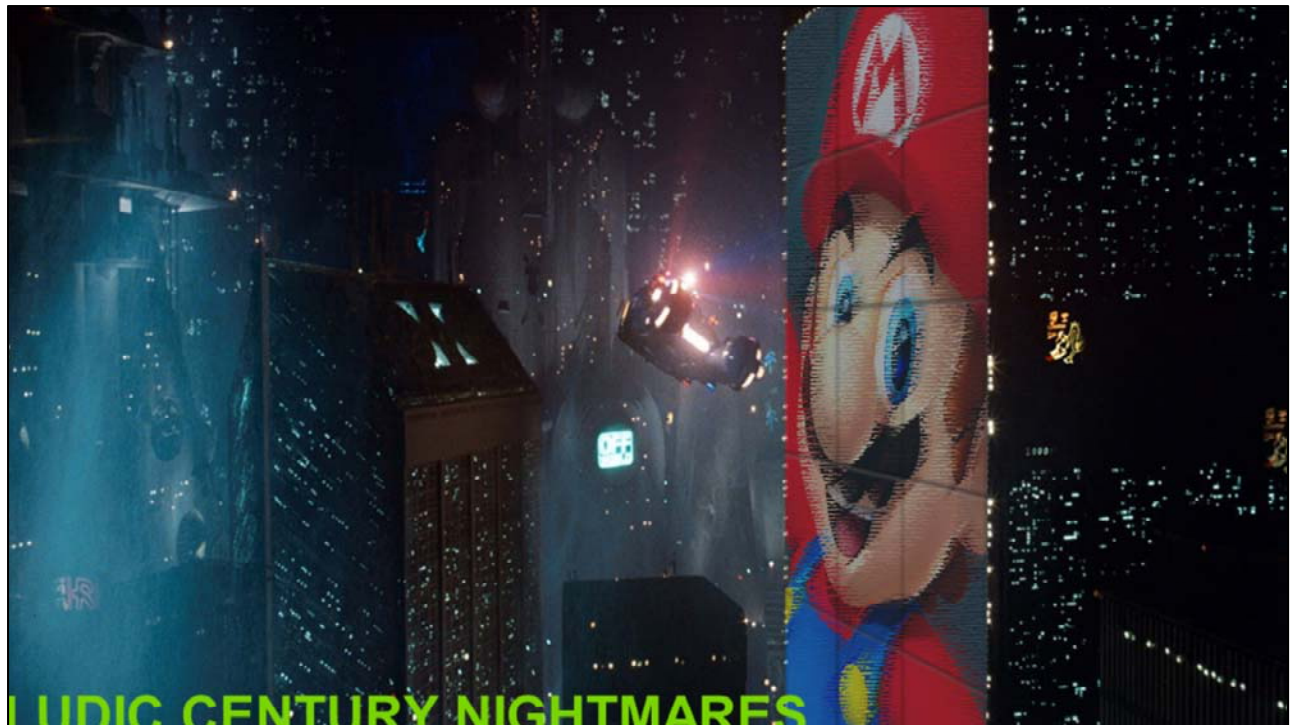
My take on this is that games have always been sites of tension between cultural ideas about the *productive* and the *unproductive*--not just between ideas like work and leisure, but between the idea of "doing something for a purpose" and "doing something for no reason save itself." There's a reason that both colloquial usage and theoretical definitions of "games" define them specifically as being unproductive leisure activities, in a distinct sphere of life from productive pursuits--if you **MUST** do it for money or survival, it's not usually considered "just a game."



This tension is at the heart of Bernard Suits' 1978 book *The Grasshopper: Games Life and Utopia*. It's my favorite book about games, told as a story that turns the classic Aesop fable on its head. Suits describes games as activities where we put unnecessary obstacles in our way -- where we exert effort for no practical reason, solely because we find the activity meaningful and rewarding in and of itself. The Grasshopper, who's the foolish, lazy doofus of Aesop's version because he refuses to work productively like the toiling ants, becomes a reflective hero in Suits' story--he believes in the potential for a utopia beyond scarcity, where we could all devote ourselves to activities that we find intrinsically meaningful. So when we look at how games have been used, reviled, rehabilitated throughout history, it reminds me of a tug of war between the ideology of the ants and that of the grasshopper. Games have often been regarded as juvenile, immoral, meaningless, or wasteful. At the same time, we can see that whole new categories of games have surfaced through attempts to harness or regulate games into more useful tools for society.



What is being harnessed, regulated, recuperated by the system? The excess of energy, time and unharnessed motivation, the thing that's bound up in why games are characterized as a "pass-time" -- the activity of gamblers and other "undesirable elements" of the 19th century with nothing to lose, the unused downtime of soldiers when they're not needed for killing and dying, the disposable wealth of Italian nobles, the additional middle-class family time created by the industrial revolution, the "too much time" on the hands of under-employed gamers who fit the stereotype of living in their parents' basements. Sooner or later, there is a drive to grab this excess, a constant trickle what Bataille called the Accursed Share, and try to harness it for the productive ends of society.



According to Eric Zimmerman, the 21st century will see that trickle widen into a flood. His Ludic Century Manifesto is not a promotion of the usefulness of games, just of their importance -- the belief that games will come to dominate the spectacular landscape of our culture, that the lion's share of the economic and libidinal excesses inherent to advanced capitalism will flow into games. As the economy ends up serving fewer and fewer people with meaningful activity or sustainable life, as labor is mechanized, as unemployment gradually climbs towards 50%, and as the consumer cost of digital entertainment falls towards zero, Zimmerman could be right--BECAUSE there might not be anything TO do but play free online games and try not to starve. But where will all the excess, unharnessed energy go? Bataille would say it must either be expressed, or turn into violent conflict and warfare.



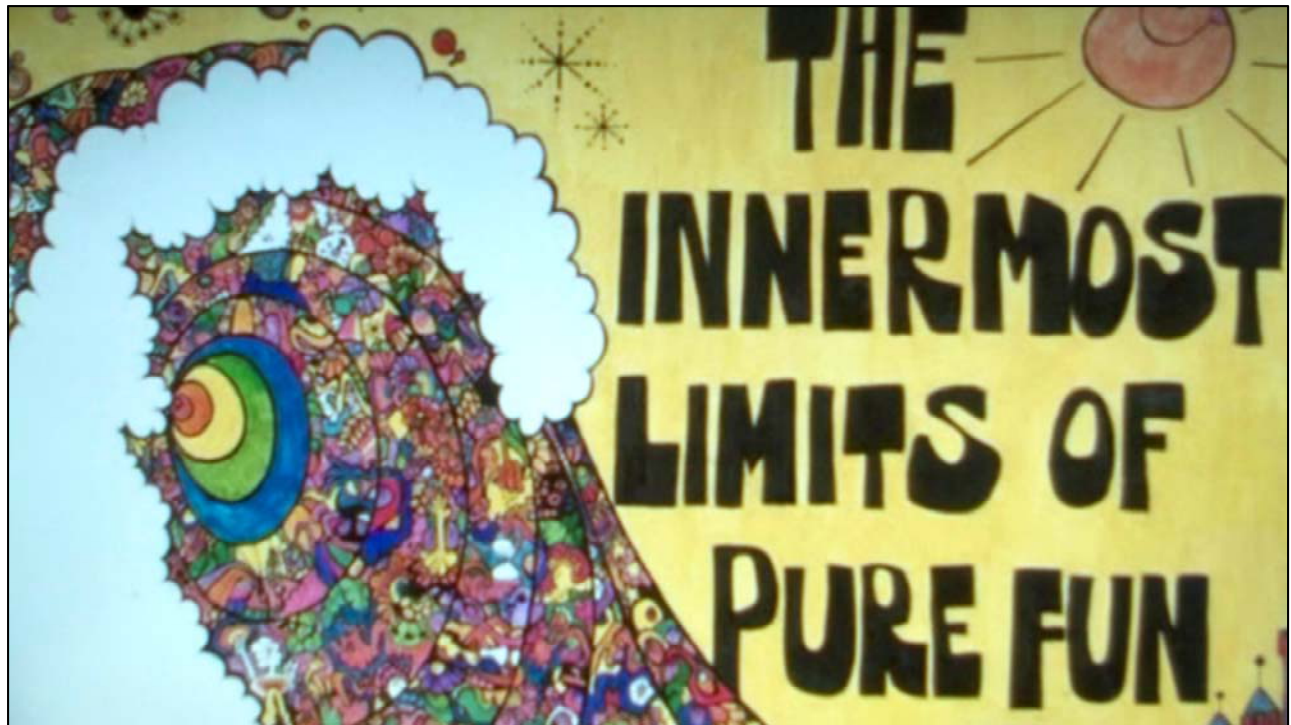
We're in the midst of an ongoing, decades-long attempt to rehabilitate games on multiple fronts, to capture this excess and once again make games more *useful*: not just as tools for education, but as vehicles for messaging by the non-profit industrial complex, as recruitment and propaganda for the military, as advertisements for consumer products. Everyone has a use for games. Jane McGonigal evangelizes the idea that games can make the world a better place, by using game mechanics to reprogram our habits and motivations, but doesn't this become a



nightmare immediately if we simply take out the assumption of positive ends and don't think about the fact that it's a nice lady like Jane saying it?



How do we queer this picture? We might choose to make games useful for gay rights! We can jump on this bandwagon and harness games for productive, queer-positive goals! We can use games to teach people about what it's like to be a trans woman! This is what many people assume the highest purpose of a game like dys4ia is, despite Anna Anthropy insisting that she did not make the game for cis people to go through an "empathy simulation." That's how easy it is to fall into the utilitarian narrative, to shoo off the Grasshopper and believe that the worth of games come from their role as productive members of society. I cannot see this as queering the system; it's more like gay-liberating the system -- accepting this same cycle of rehabilitating the excess "waste" of games, just repeating it with a rainbow flag on top.

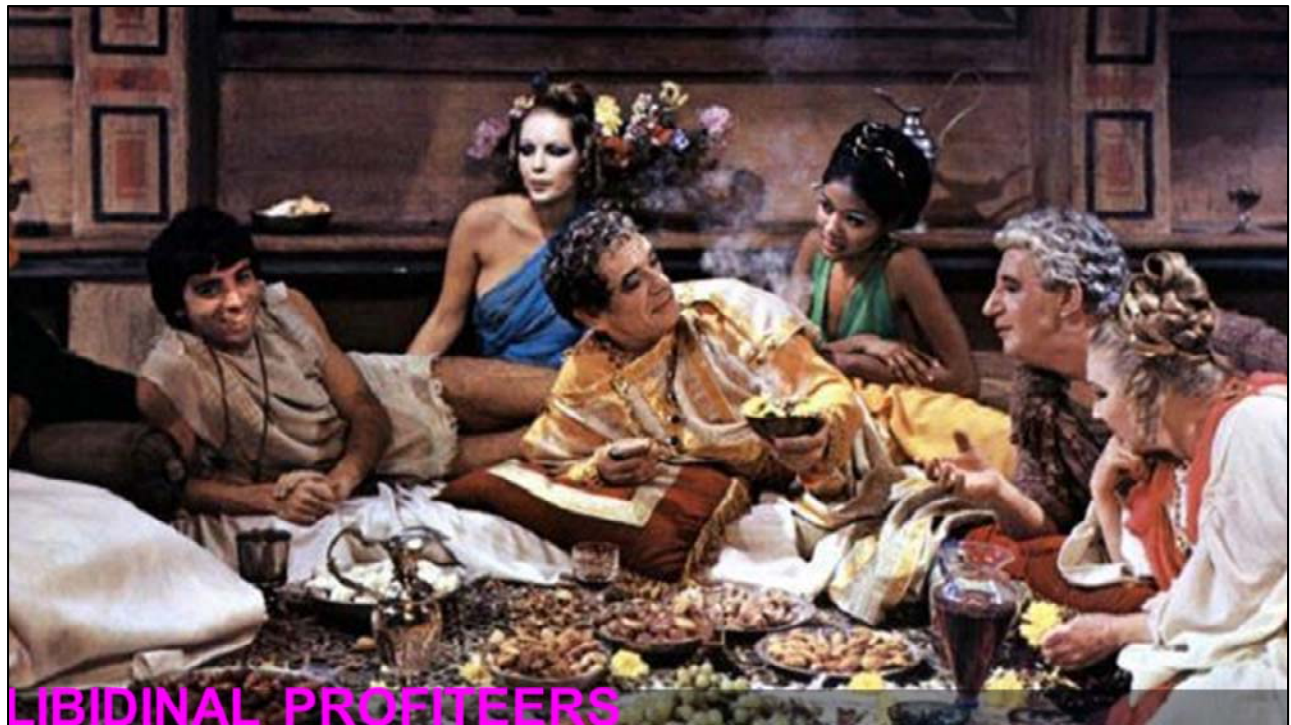


So is the answer the opposite? Queer theory and the queer politic is often concerned with questioning the fundamental logic of systems that enforce the rules of society: the heteronormative family structure, the idea of history as "onwards and upwards" progress towards a goal, and so forth. So should we insist that games remain "purely unproductive" and not be turned towards any practical ends...? Hey, if we want to advocate for pure fun, this could even win us friends and allies in Gamergate, right?

THIS MACHINE KILLS CONSUMER MONARCHISTS



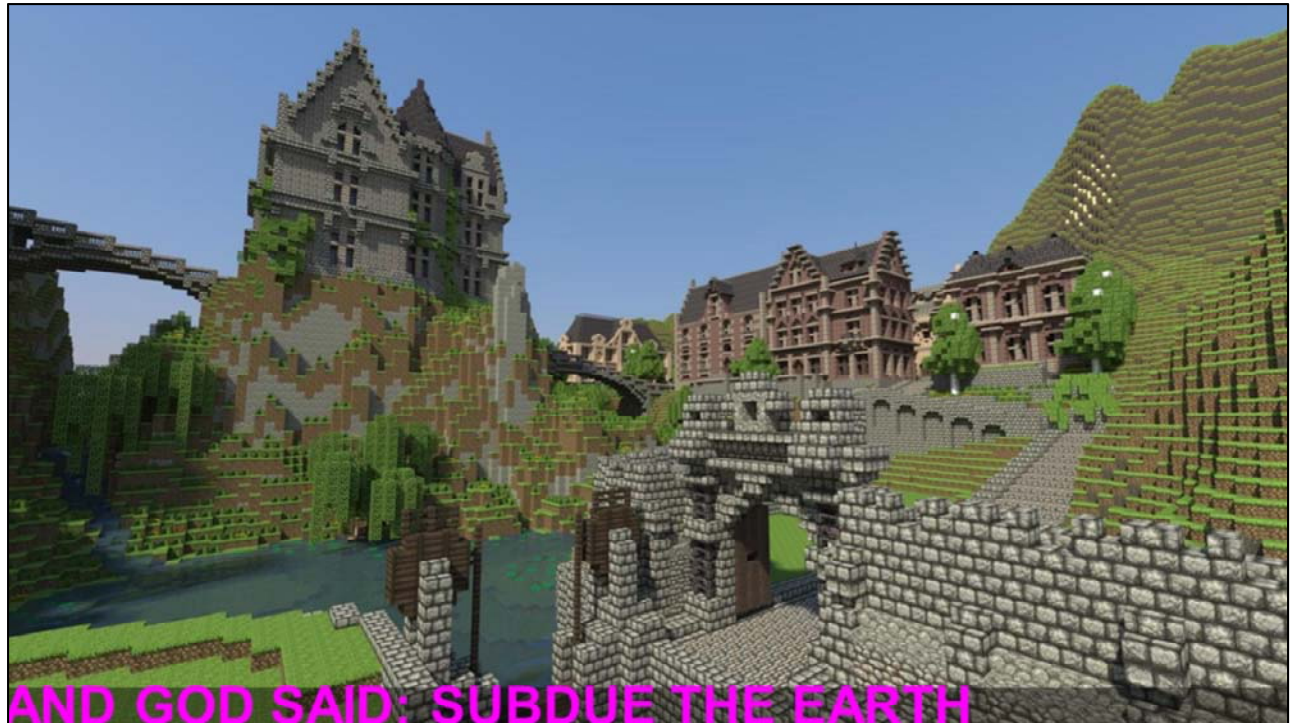
I hope you don't think I was going to say YES to that. The relegation of games to "pure entertainment, no practical value or politics here" is just as much part of this endless dialectic as the flip side;



it's gaming as the overflow tank, the colostomy bag, a mechanism that society uses to keep angry, horny young men pacified, then spits upon us. And of course, this status for games is a billion dollar industry -- excess libidinal energy turned into massive profit, especially off of games as disposable, single-player consumer products and identity-driving lifestyle accessories. And of course, there ARE already messages in games: messages that simply prop up unquestioned assumptions, oppressions, and conventional wisdom. The profit-raking status quo does not need to be propped up, but neither do games need to be "saved" by being reformed into productive, church-going, highly educated, socially upright citizens. If we want to interrogate this picture with queer questions, what we should foreground instead are matters of individual agency and survival; the relationships of people and games on a human level, rather than only the broad historical scale I've just gone through.



MERRITT: games are cultural fantasies of the way things work. through play -- not just through representations or images -- we tell stories about how we believe or want to believe the world works. for instance, authors like darius kazemi and robert yang have pointed out that war games are less accurate descriptions of the conduct of contemporary warfare and more a projection of ideas and cultural fantasies about war and heroism. that is, the face of modern warfare is mostly not hardened groups of infantry facing similarly-armed opponents, as most war games tend to depict it. instead, it's mostly about surveillance and strikes carried out remotely through advanced technologies. at some level, we may understand this, but the continued existence of first-person shooter war games reinforces the imagery of infantry battles in our minds.



and games project our fantasies in even more insidious and subtle ways. consider so-called open-world games that provide the player with a space of apparently-limitless possibility, one simply waiting for them to explore, plunder, and modify to their liking. while we praise these games for the freedom and creativity they inspire in their players, we usually don't consider the ways that their worlds map onto colonial fantasies of 'empty' space at the frontier. in open-world roleplaying games like skyrim, the entire world is lushly rendered in order to make it available to harvest and make useful, either through converting it into potions or by selling raw materials to vendors. in minecraft, this process is even more obvious -- the player is presented with a world that they are almost completely free to modify at their whim, one whose only other inhabitants are violent monsters and animals whose bodies can be used for various purposes.

all games are abstractions, and all abstractions involve human, and thus, political decisions about what to include or emphasize. in the context of digital games where the rules can be selectively concealed from the player, these decisions are invisibilized and naturalized -- as in the case of simcity, which presents itself as a city simulation but leaves absent racial dynamics like redlining.

even more broadly, as paolo pedercini points out, most videogames place the player in a relatively straightforward scenario with clear goals. the overwhelming focus on goals, efficiency, and accomplishment in videogames has led him to describe the medium as the 'aesthetic form of rationalization.' for pedercini, any games that

participate in these logics have the potential to reinforce the efficiency-driven capitalist mindset through the repetitive actions of the player, regardless of their content. whether the player is leaping pits, mining ore, matching gems, or avoiding enemy bullets, on some level they are performing the same kinds of tasks.



but games inflect not just the player's economic mindset and relationships. play spreads across the affective landscape of the family, interacting with gendered dynamics to produce intensely charged situations.

we often speak of games as a safe space for experiencing failure. for some reason, we don't seem to talk much about the ways that games have functioned as crucibles of social failure within the family, served as the sites of intense emotional trauma, and reinforced the value of competitive conflict. in games with our families, we struggle to overcome our siblings -- and sometimes, temporarily and falsely -- our parents, in a kind of practice for our engagement with the wider world.

if games provide a safe space for failure, and that space makes them inherently queer, then why is it that so many women, so many queers, simply fall out of wanting to play games at some point while growing up? the usual answer here is stigma: that play is the realm of children, disdained by adults for both its lack of economic utility and the fear that they will be made to look foolish or out of control while playing.

but i think it's also because of the shared culture between digital and non-digital games, especially sports and competitive mainstream board games, and this way this culture is inculcated early on in experiences of play with family members and peers. it's a culture that emphasizes competition, humiliation, and mastery. for kids on the receiving end of losses, especially kids made to feel incapable in other realms, the experience of failure isn't one of freedom or escape. it's a reinforcement, a reminder.

and in a sense, adulthood -- with the promise of leaving play -- is the escape. how many of us looked forward with desperate anticipation to the day we'd never have to take another gym class or play another game of friday night scrabble with our families? the competitive culture of play is tightly bound up with the matrix of gendered heterosexuality, and for young people dealing with gendered and sexualized oppression, withdrawing from competitive play can be a self-protection tactic to reduce the number of sites for the enactment of violence.

but the ludic logic of competition, first practiced in the family, extends out into the broader world. competitive game communities valorize competition and struggle as breeding innovation and determination, echoing capitalist fantasies about 'becoming a better person' through mastery and victory. and these ideals inform even marginal indie games as well -- think of the intense, if playful competition in games like j.s. joust that is limited to the able-bodied and favors players with tall, muscular, flexible bodies.



YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS
ARE DEAD.

GAME OVER

so here's a central tension that inquiries around queer games have yet to resolve: on the one hand, we have queer games scholars telling us that play and games are inherently queer, while on the other, lots of queer people have personal, historical, social, and political reasons for disliking even the most playful, casual forms of competitive play. games have wrought real, last damaging on so many of us at an individual level, and any honest exploration of queerness and games cannot afford to simply ignore this impact.

here i want to emphasize that we need to think very carefully about what failure really means in games. it's not enough to declare that games provide safe spaces for failing when so many queers don't seem to experience them that way, when play has actually been a site of intense trauma for so many of us.

and if failure actually reinforces the importance of the rules and structure of the game, as jesper juul suggests in the art of failure, then the supposed safe, queer space for failing suddenly starts to seem a lot closer to the mantras of venture capitalism. fail better, fail harder, fail in order to succeed. and indeed, games are celebrated in educational circles for just this ability: the potential to teach a player the workings of a system, to discipline themselves in accordance with the system's rules.



here it's easy to see what pederchini means when he describes games as the 'aesthetic form of rationalization' and points to the ways that most games reinforce the capitalist mindset regardless of content. because if failure simply encourages us to throw ourselves back into the system then games are simply a safe space to learn how to be a good subject in systems of power, and perhaps that's another reason why so many queers have such a hard time with them.

we love to talk about games making people more systems literate, but most games aren't actually concerned with improving systems literacy -- they simply teach players how to be good participants in systems, keeping them running without understanding how they truly operate. as jp lebreton notes, many games simply push the player to understand their systems insofar as they reward optimizing for a given variable, like gold or experience points, echoing the capitalist drive to maximize profits while ignoring externalities.

it's been fashionable recently to valorize failure -- in games and elsewhere -- as inherently queer, to celebrate the experience of what dominant culture would coercively describe as a lack or a loss. accounts of the transformative, useful effects of failure can be powerful, but they can also obscure the fact that the experience of failure -- whether in a game, capitalist economies, or with regards to systems of gendered norms -- can be deeply painful. and it's important to remember that these distinct experiences of failure are often intertwined: a failure to achieve appropriately gendered status affects one's experiences with employment and play, as well.

but let's think bigger for a minute. we talk a lot about all the ways we can use games. but what if we stopped and thought about games themselves as actors, and asked what they've been up to over the centuries? this might sound like a strange approach, but it's an established one in science and technology studies. without getting too much into it, actor-network theory and related approaches reject a human-centric approach to research, preferring to consider all entities in a network -- including technologies & materials, not just humans, as potential actors.



an evolutionary perspective on games might describe them as a kind of 'exercise machines' for our capacity to select, adapt, and discard goals. in this account, games are less tools intentionally developed for a particular purpose than they are evolutionary organs of culture, changing and shifting with human groups and societies. we start to see games as actors, almost, as entities that have been a part of us, doing things with and to us all along, whether we've intended it that way or not.

so, if we stretch the fitness metaphor, what parts of our minds do games exercise? if we consider popular contemporary genres like first-person shooters, adventure games, rogue-likes, and so on, it starts to seem like we're working the same muscle groups over and over, like an isotonic exercise machine that just works out one part of the body at a time. we get very good at reflex-based challenges, at problem-solving within a context where goals are generally given, and managing limited resources.



and this is another reason to question the games we play: we don't spend much time thinking about what they're doing with us or what we're doing with them. pedercini argues that most games support the capitalist mindset and thinking about this in terms of exercise lets us understand the deep way in which this occurs. rather than simply transmitting dominant values, most games inadvertently encourage us to develop our capacities which are most useful to dominant systems. we can think of this, in foucault's terms, as a kind of disciplining process: it occurs with and through the participation of the disciplined subject.

for instance, david golumbia argues, in a study of world of warcraft and half-life, that MMOs and FPS games are more like training simulators for work under capitalism than anything else. there's little meaningful play going on, only a relentless push towards efficiency and completion. golumbia goes so far as to say that the term 'game' is a misnomer for a large percent of interactive digital works. here he's supported by theorists like keith burgun, who argue that extremely popular titles like pokemon actually aren't games at all, because their primary mechanic of grinding boils down to a trade-off between the player's real-life time and their in-game success. in other words, grinding isn't a meaningful choice within the context of the game.

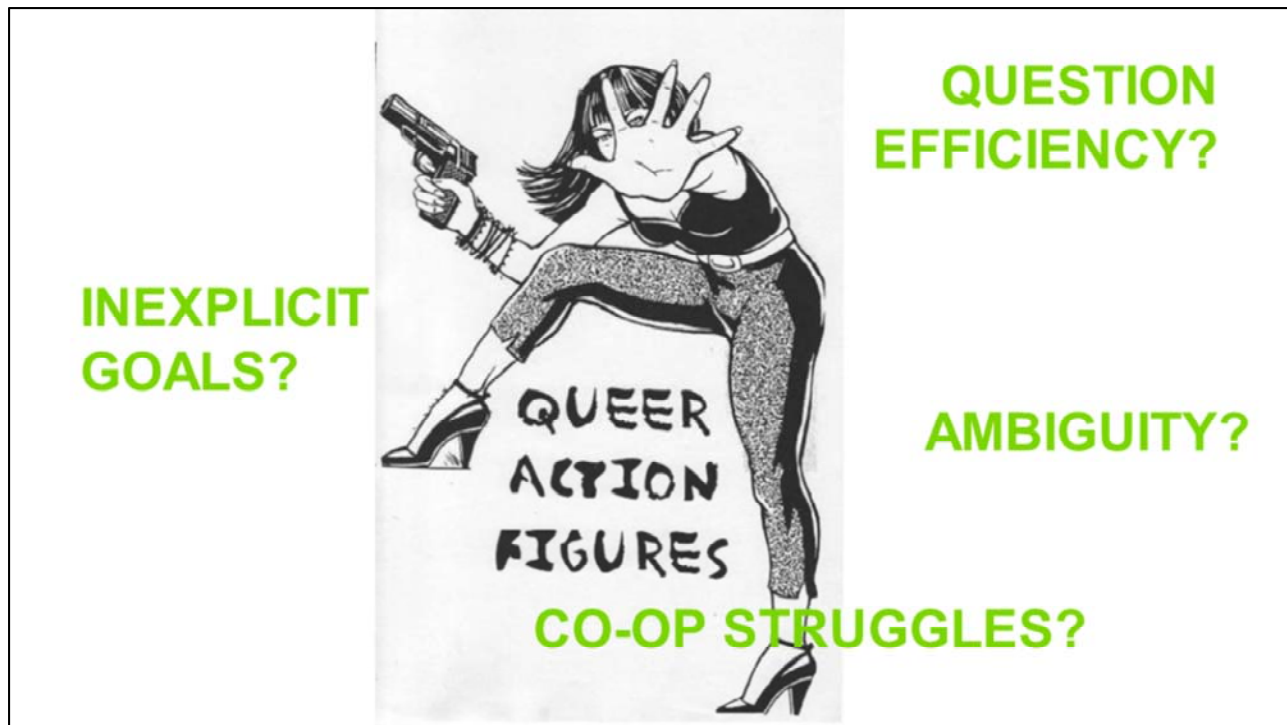
similarly, avery mcdaldno's work has argued that the genre conventions of contemporary RPGs reinforce ideas about individual progress and success under white supremacy and capitalism. the ownership of individual characters which build in

power and capability over time, the centrality of the player characters as chosen heroes within the world, and even the mechanic of attributes like IQ or intelligence, purporting to capture mental capacities in a single number, reinforce particular dominant views of the world. mcdaldno and jolie st. patrick gave a talk at this very conference last year in which they forcefully argued that representations of queer people within these traditional systems are effectively toothless and worse, they reinforce the legitimacy of existing structures through gestures of inclusion.

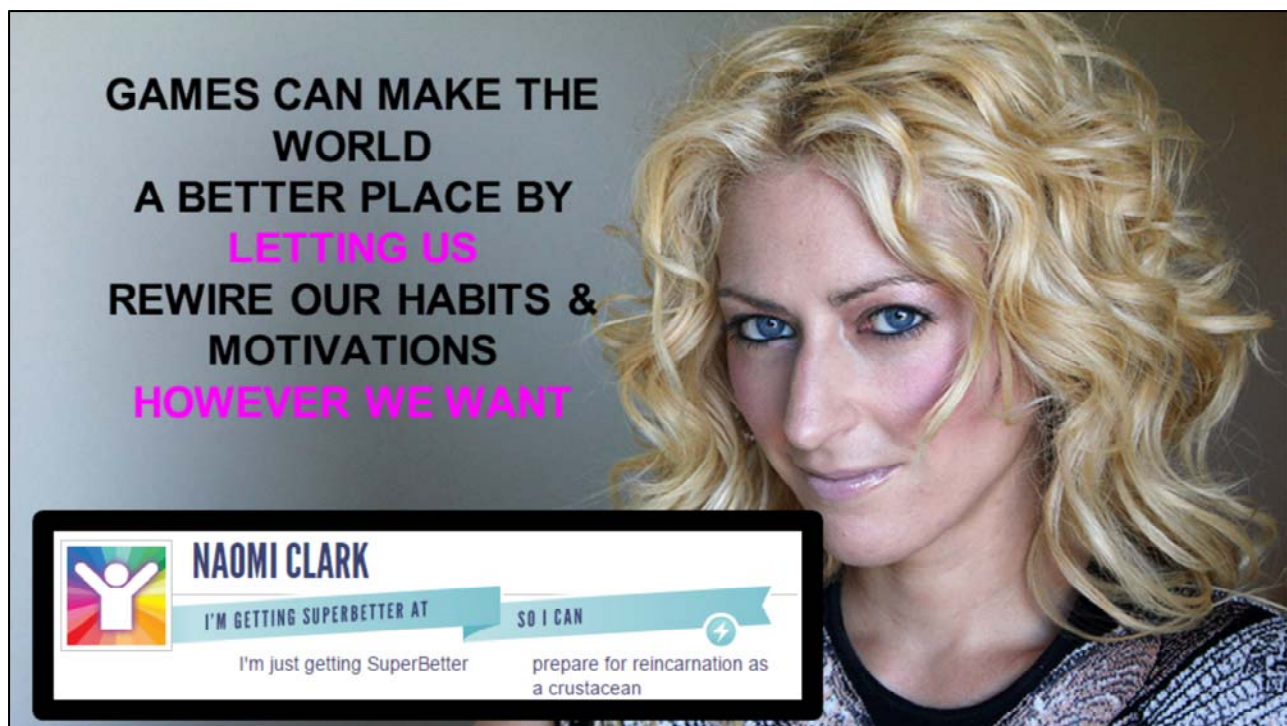
in response, mcdaldno and others have put forward the notion of queer mechanics, pointing to games that radically differ from the kinds of patterns established by mainstream games. maybe we can understand this shift as a turn away from the isolated 'muscle pumping' of traditional games and towards a more holistic experience of the body, an encouragement to explore parts of ourselves that we are encouraged to let atrophy under existing power structures.



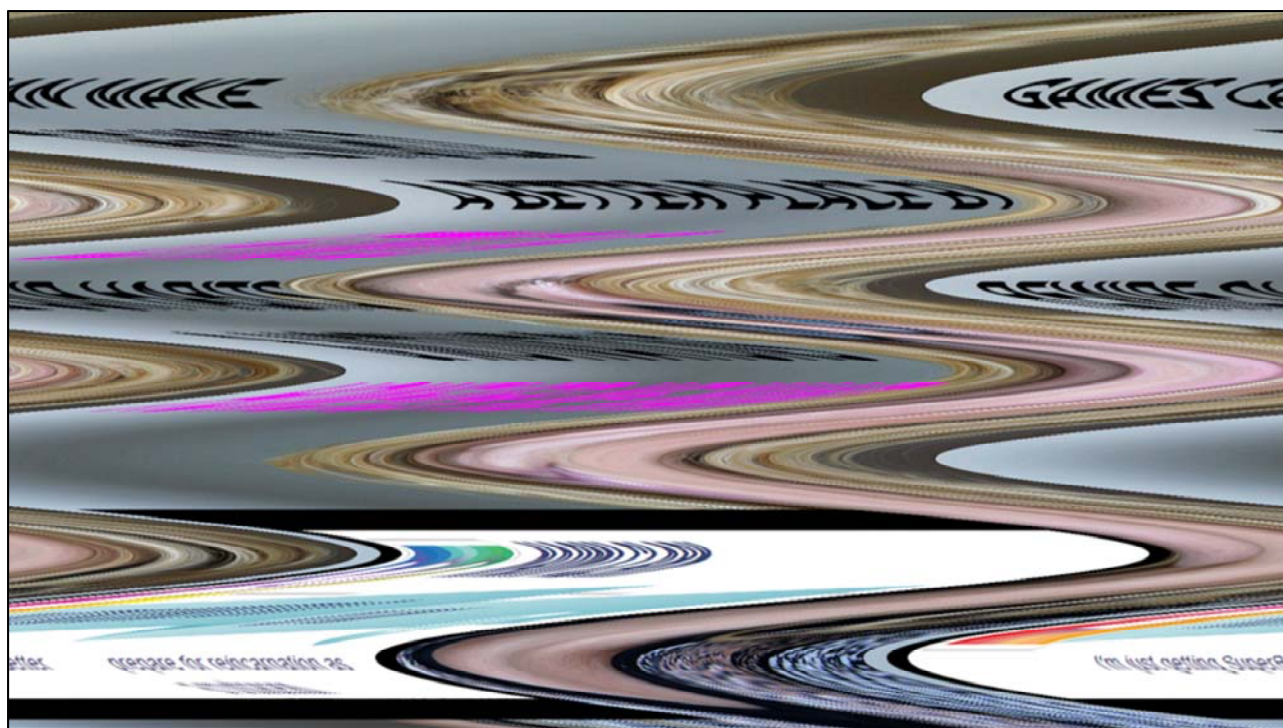
as play comes to resemble work under capitalism, play, like labour, becomes alienated. we are told that the repetitive, isolating exercise of contemporary games is 'fun', indeed, we expect it to be fun, we want it to be. and sometimes we believe it is, and sometimes we really do find moments of genuine enjoyment in it. but the damage wrought by the alienation of play is real: we forget how to play outside of the context of games, and we become accustomed to having our goals provided to us. perhaps it becomes a little easier to understand the malicious, virulent, seemingly goalless outbursts of violent white masculinity under the banner of "gamergate" when we think about the ways in which we've used games to discipline ourselves, the ways they've encouraged us to develop mostly those capacities that are useful to capital, and not ones like empathy, problem-making, or systems thinking.



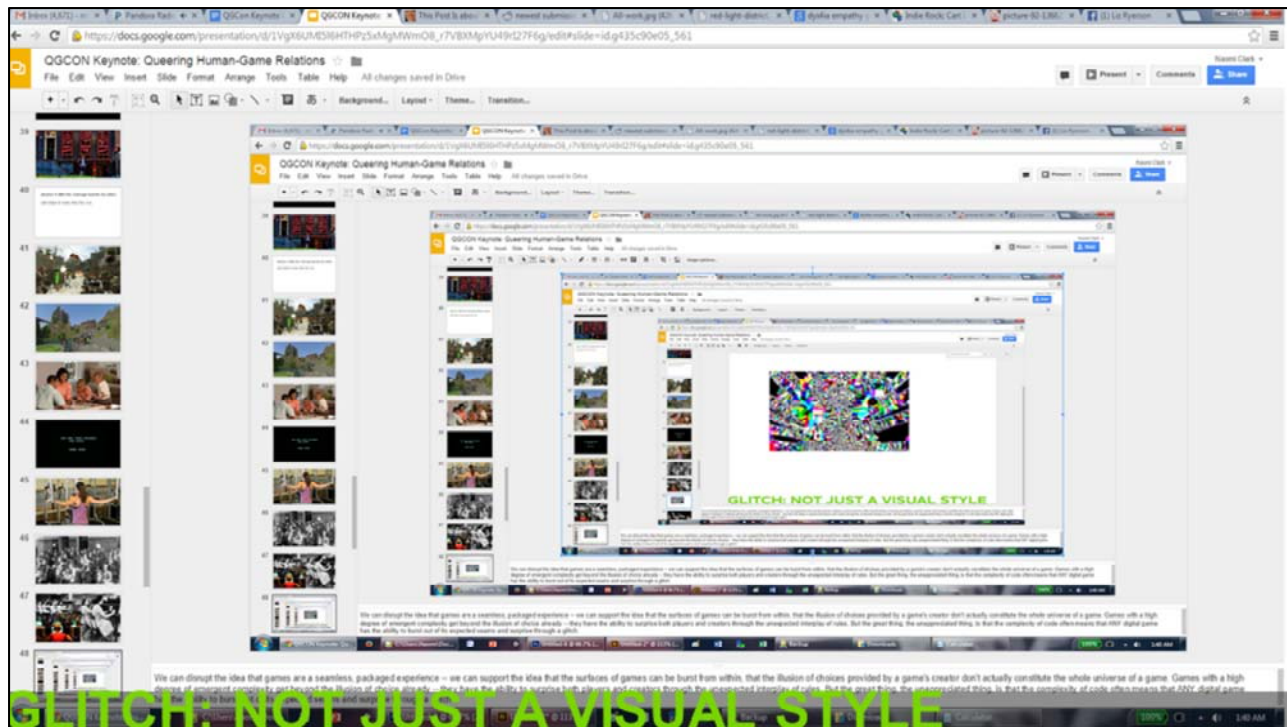
NAOMI: So what are the alternatives to the alienated, isolated "reps" of existing games? How can we break out of these modes? We've already talked about a few ways, or at least thrown up targets to try and blow up. In surveying this landscape, hopefully we've pointed out some potentially fruitful experiments to try, and some interesting creators. But we can find some direct, positive examples of queerness as well.



One can actually be seen nestled in the middle of the flagship game of Jane's motivational ideology -- since although SuperBetter has plenty of baked-in suggestions on how it can be productive for your life, for exercise, weight loss, or treating depression and anxiety, the game's structure is also compassionate enough to contain a more playful escape clause, the ability for you to set whatever ludicrous goal works for you.



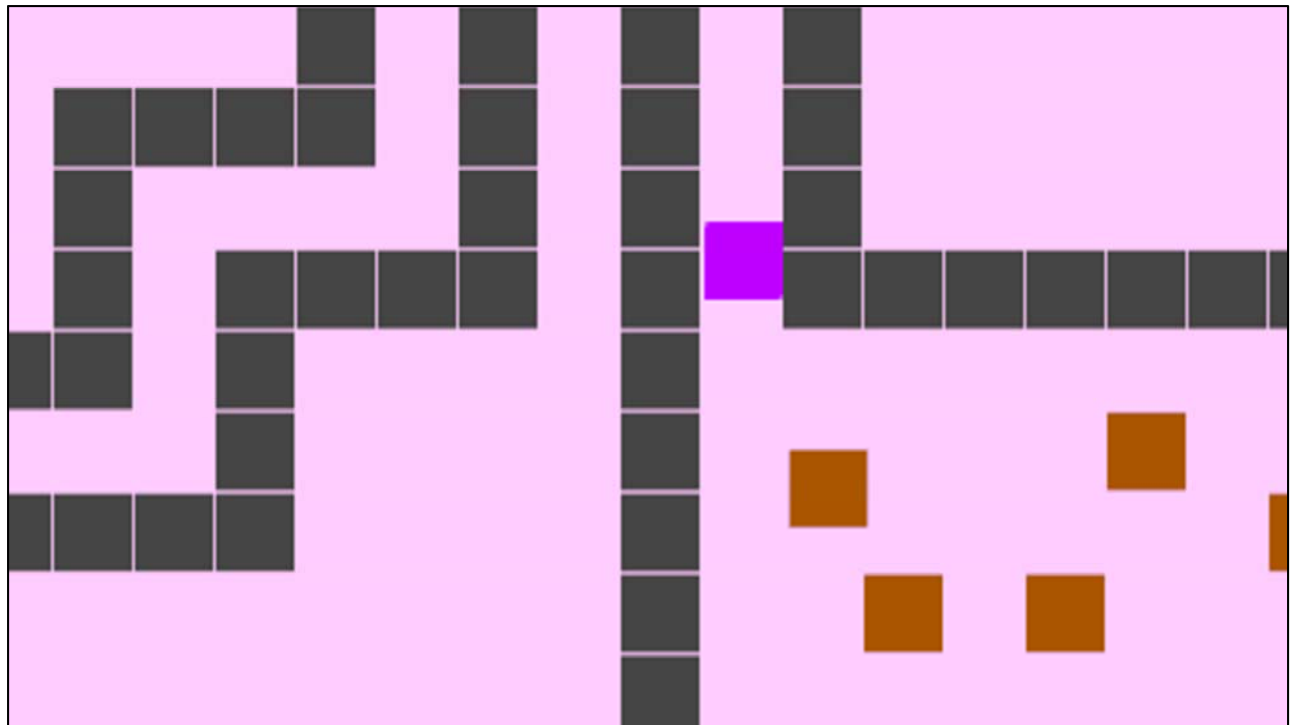
But let's talk about glitches for a second.



With glitches we can disrupt the idea that games are a seamless, packaged experience -- we can support the idea that the surfaces of games can be burst from within, that the illusion of choices provided by a game's creator don't actually constitute the whole universe of a game. Games with a high degree of emergent complexity get beyond the illusion of choice already -- they have the ability to surprise both players and creators through the unexpected interplay of rules. But the great thing, the unappreciated thing, is that the complexity of code often means that ANY digital game has the ability to burst out of its seams and surprise through a glitch.



The concept we have to queer here is that there's a binary of "good surprises" and "bad surprises." Rocket jumping in Quake is almost canonically thought of as a "good surprise," an emergent result of physics rules, because it can be used by a player to move towards the defined goals of a game. Glitches are thought of as "bad surprises" because they can derail gameplay -- but what if the orderly flow of gameplay was not the only thing we cared about? Clearly, for glitch-driven Lets Play videos, or free-form exploration of a game's vicissitudes, we care about much more than satisfying goals, even in the sole pursuit of pleasure. Glitches are a way for a game to express itself; in glitches we can see that a game may actually have that starts to approach agency, even if it's a blind, spasmodic reaction.



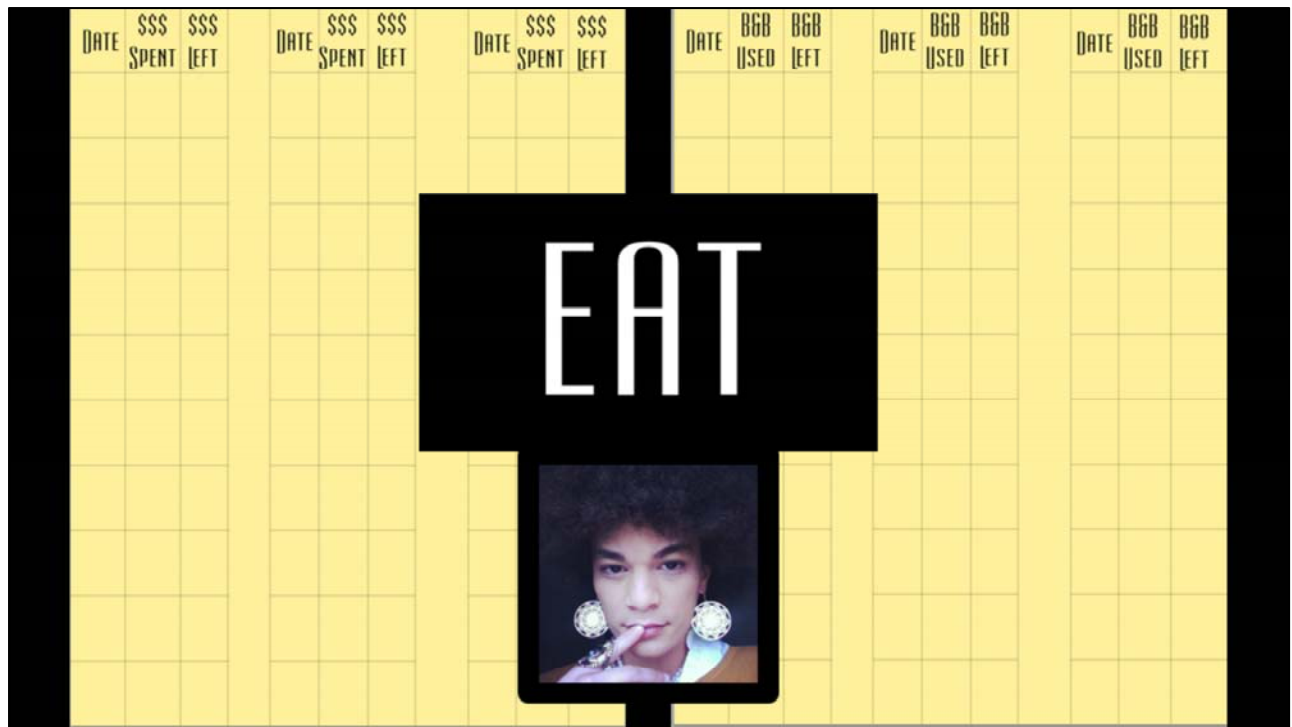
To support glitches doesn't necessarily mean putting them in on purpose; is a deliberate glitch even a glitch? To support may mean not revealing whether a glitch is intentional or not, preserving a certain sense of wonder as to where it came from, why, and what the meaning of a glitch is. There's a mystery in the noteworthy glitch in this game, LIM; when the violence against your abstract character, who's attempting to pass as normative in hostile environments, grows too great, the oppressor squares often knock you right through the walls that surround the game, into a curiously wide-open and free space. beyond boundaries. The designer, Merritt Kopas, has refused to disclose whether she made that possible on purpose, or whether the game has organically expressed something that somehow managed to complement the designed ideas of the game perfectly.



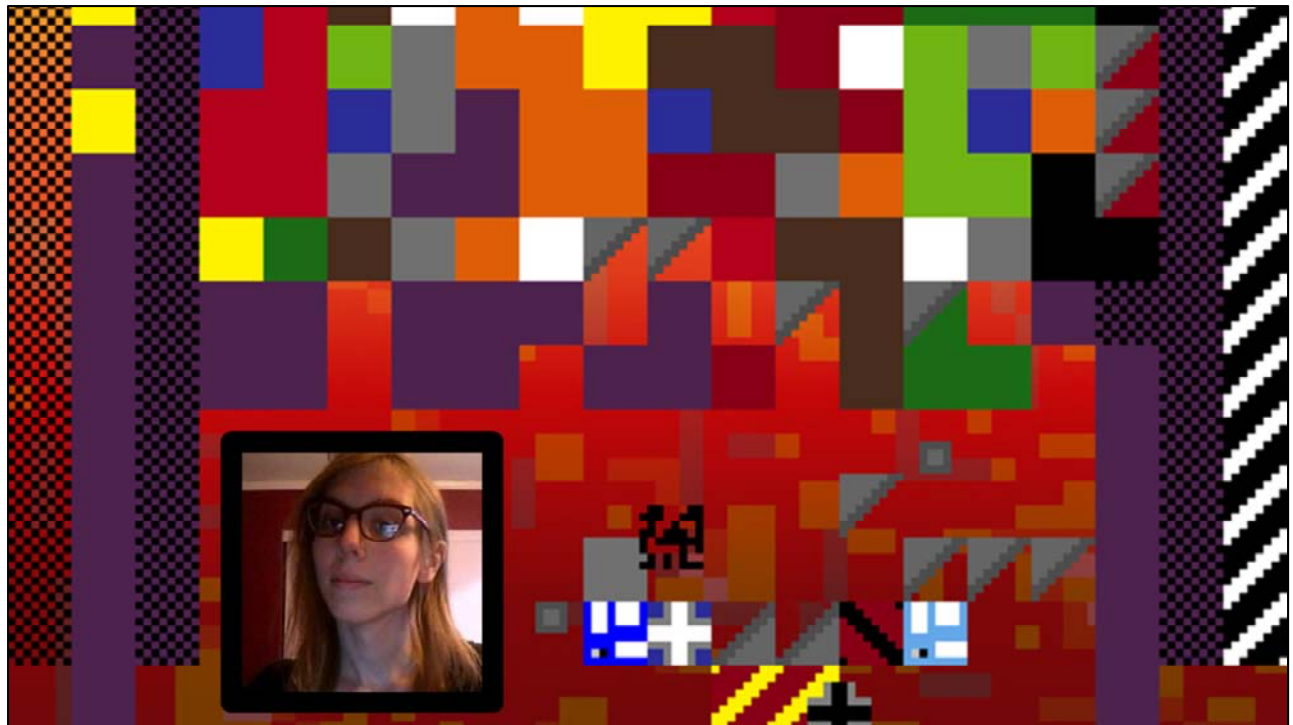
So that would be a magical, almost miraculous glitch. And yet we close ourselves off to such glitches when we strive for perfect code-polish, in part to avoid the wrath of gamers who get angry about bugs, who expect a seamless pleasure-experience out of the box they purchased. Thankfully, we have the work of people like Robert Yang, who looks deeply into the code and assets of games, as well as accounts of development, to do a recent-past archaeology of coding practice. In Robert's examinations we can see that we DO want to know how the sausage gets made -- because the sausage of games is full of all kinds of amazing micro-glitches and barely perceptible workarounds in glitchland, like the fact that the tram at the start of Half-Life actually consists of two different trams on two different levels, one which can't move at all.



Glitches are a kind of queer failure that we should celebrate, but it's too drastic and uncontrolled a failure for the orthodox notion of games to accept. Games are perfectly comfortable with expected, "try again and get stronger" forms of failure, of course -- as Merritt has already said -- as long as the failure doesn't get out of control -- as long as the player never escapes the comforting, vast palm of the game designer's reach.



Some of the most drastic and challenging work being done in games explores the far reaches of "failure unacceptable for games," and it's being done by queer artists. Games like Mattie Brice's *EAT*, which I'm not sure has ever been played at all, because it overwhelms players with the promise of failure from the beginning; the point, in my reading of the game, is that if you try to live Mattie Brice's existence, in addition to or instead of your own, you will almost certainly fail, and with real consequences.



This is the game that I have failed at more and harder in the last year than any other game: Liz Ryerson's Problem Attic. I cannot penetrate its uncompromising surfaces. Like many other very difficult games I have played, it may be a game that I am simply not good enough at to play. I know many, many other people have given up at this game, found it offputting in the way it does not cozen or ingratiate itself with players in any way at all -- in its construction, it rejects the idea of games as design objects centered on affordances for player usability, and that may be part of why it's rarely discussed. But this also points out the need to stop thinking about games purely as "things that *I* the player can play." My most meaningful experience with Problem Attic was through someone else's play experiences: Brendan Vance, who wrote an in-depth piece of game criticism about it. I hope he does a Let's Play as well.



We can also think about alternate states for games to arrive at besides just winning, losing, or creating a hierarchy of rank; furthermore, we can queer existing theories of games and play to do so.



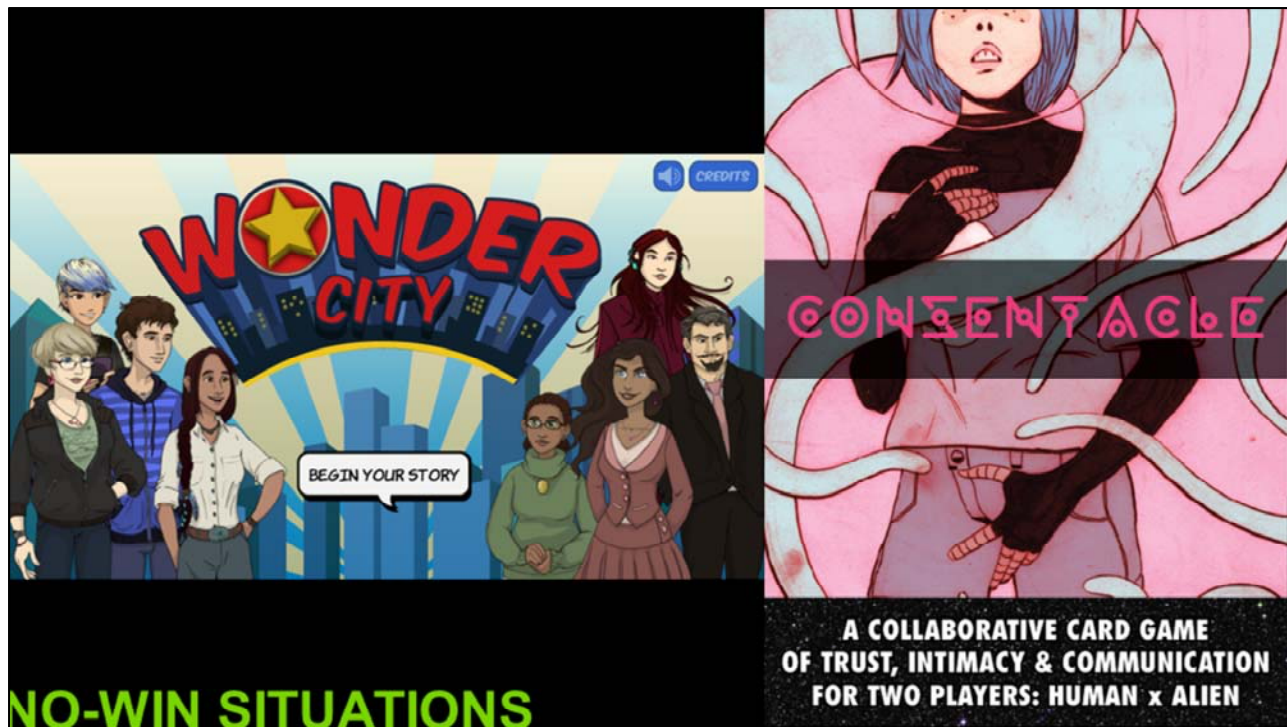
Take this particularly dry and formal description of what a game is by two theorists of play who are frequently cited in attempts by academics and game designers to define what a game is. Definitions are usually deployed as "just so stories" or taxonomies that describe what we supposedly already know about games, so most of the time a disequibrial outcome is taken to mean the difference between a winner and a loser, between 1st and 3rd and 5th place. Interestingly, there are so many other ways to think about these words: other ways that we could REMOVE EQUILIBRIUM from a system, that we could shake up the state of a game like rumpling a sheet.



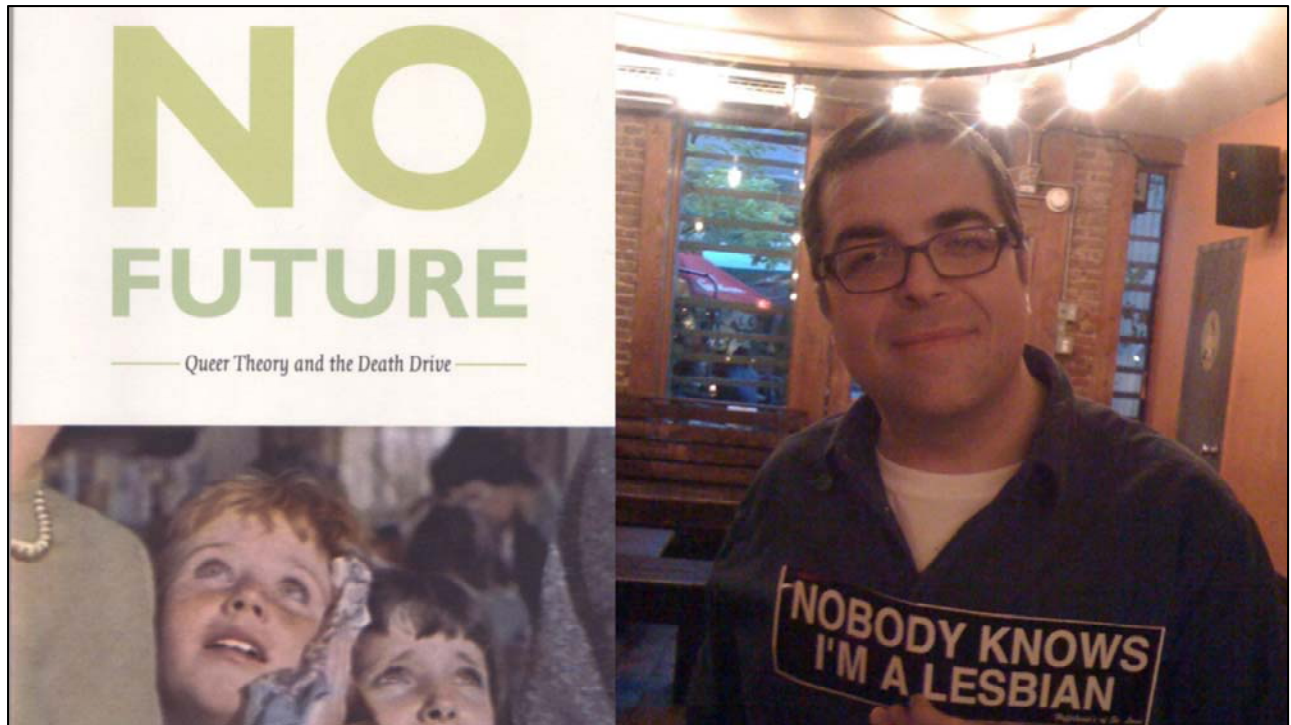
To get at what I mean, let's look at some board games; chess moves from a state of equilibrium, identical forces lined up on a field of battle, and plunges into disequilibrium as pieces move and capture each other. Symmetrical sides are very common as an initial state for competitive games -- all players starting in identical or at least equally balanced positions, despite this being a strangely artificial situation if we think of games as simulations of some aspect of reality. Games that start off out of equilibrium have existed for a long time -- like the Tafl genre, which depicts a band of vikings surrounded and outnumbered 2:1, such that their only choice is to escape. The result is a game that goes from one disequilibrium to another even more chaotic disequilibrium. For various reasons, this more asymmetrical form hasn't been explored as much until recent years.



If we continue to queer -- rather than simply discarding -- existing modes and structures of games, as well as formal ideas about games, there's really no limit to the odd new disequilibriums we could find. This is a potentially queer way of analyzing games: through thinking about the disruptions produced in the process of play, the way that they show us systems moving from more equilibrium to less, or perhaps the other way around. Perhaps the important part of Avedon & Sutton-Smith's definition is not putting new words on "winning" and "losing" but showing us that there could be a wider palette of disequilibrating journeys to explore.



This is why I try to experiment, in my own games, with methods of creating formal gameplay structures that create outcomes more nuanced than winning, losing, or a hierarchy of higher and lower-scoring players. Both of these games, for instance, use an outcome structure that's a little more like the varying, non-ranked outcomes of a personality test.



MERRITT: in order to talk about where we can take queerness and games, i want to first come back to the question of what queerness means to us.

historically there have been tensions in queer studies between competing understandings of queerness. on the one hand you have authors who understand queerness as a rejection of the social, of the future. this has been described as an antirelational approach, and it's been associated with scholars like lee edelman who famously deconstructed the image of the child and reproductive futurism in his text no future. on the other, there are authors who see queerness as the realm of imagined possibility -- queer as the 'not yet here,' exemplified for me by the late jose munoz.

it's easy to valorize play through an antirelational understanding of queerness -- we can talk about the antiproductive character of games in the same way that we can talk about the nonreproductive nature of a lot of queer sex. but to me this is an ultimately unsatisfying position that neglects the real ways in which games buttress capitalist structures.

and further, i want to question the assumption that queerness must always be defined in opposition to utility. i want to imagine radically different definitions of 'use' that exceed utility within a capitalist system. i want to consider what a queer relation to play might look like, in which play serves to help us imagine and invoke new possibilities. this necessitates shifting our focus away from the question of what constitutes 'a queer game' and towards the investigation of new ways to relate to play,

and through it, to each other.



i think we can already see some possibilities: in collaborative analog storytelling games like every mcdaldno's dream askew,



in short digital works that serve meditative or introspective functions like michael brough's *vesper5*,



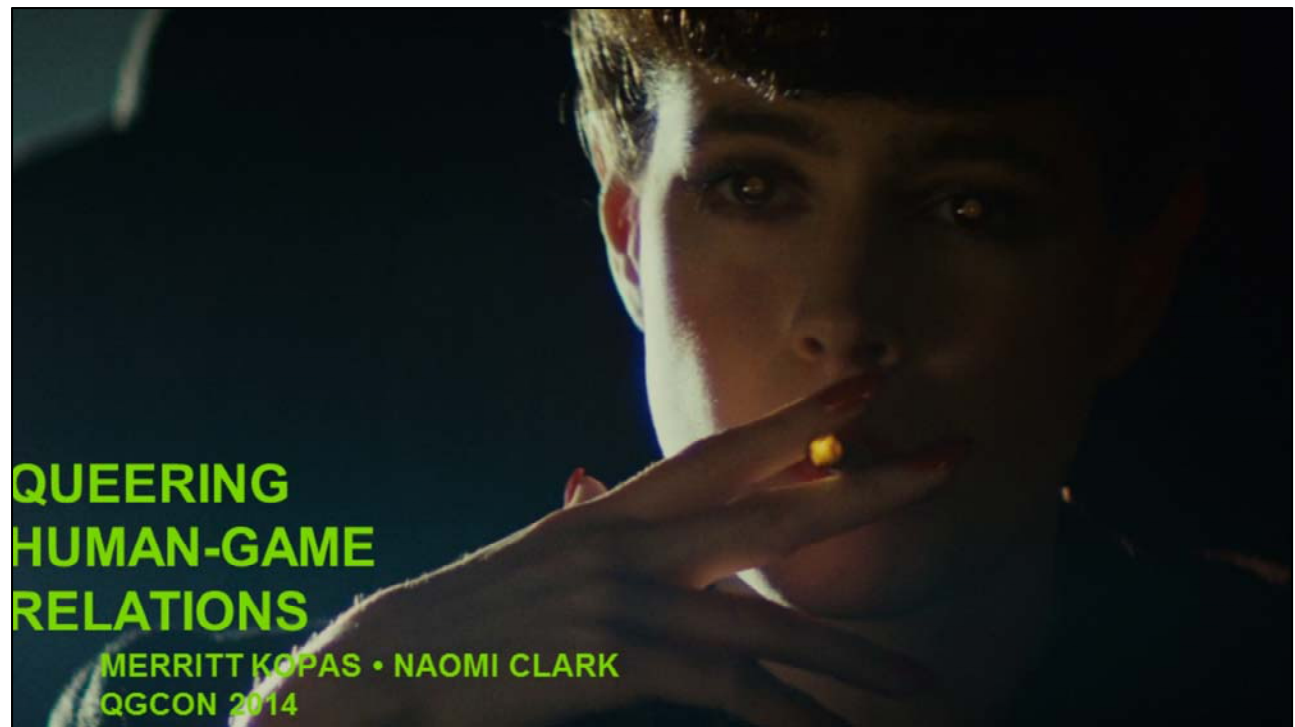
and in multiplayer games that challenge us to work together to accomplish unusual goals like Naomi's consentacle. These games encourage us to exercise capacities other than those developed by most mainstream games, capacities that include introspection, community engagement, and communication. In these games I see queer relations to play that exceed a negatory mode and move into the realm of the utopian.

Queer relations to play don't have to be reduced to nonproductive resistances to the imperatives of capital. Games can serve as sites for us to gesture towards queer utopias, to imagine alternative ways of being and living. For that to happen, we have to interrogate and rethink the work of playing.

Mutating, breaking, and twisting games are valuable actions insofar as they help make visible our assumptions about play. As Pedercini puts it, this is a 'slow and collective process of hacking accounting machines into expressive machines.' And I think consentacle is a really good example of this. It's a game about relating to other people that still heavily quantifies player interactions. I don't think that's a problem, though -- I see it as one of many steps towards something different. Just like we can't suddenly create post-oppression society simply by declaring it, we can't skip to utopian games all at once. We need to learn to value the gestures, bridges, and signposts that bring us closer, rather than giving in to the critical impulses that are often overvalued in academia and our communities. If we're actually serious about valuing failure, we need to develop our capacities to build and seek out the useful

rather than always looking for loose threads to pull on in each other's work to demonstrate our cleverness or radical credibility.

if we're able to do this, we can then begin to do the intensely necessary critical work of exposing our deep-rooted assumptions about games. by doing so, we open up these assumptions for evaluation and revision. we create the possibility of envisioning new ways to relate to games, rather than fixing on the prospect of locating queerness within games themselves. and we can begin to imagine ways of relating to games that are more multifarious, human, and liberatory.



QUEERING HUMAN-GAME RELATIONS

MERRITT KOPAS • NAOMI CLARK
QGCON 2014

Thank you!
Merritt Kopas & Naomi Clark