

INIT

NOT TO

WIN IT



Indie Game Designers Queer Time, Space, and Play

BY NINA ST. PIERRE

FEATURING PHOTOS FROM "RAINBOW ARCADE:
A QUEER HISTORY OF VIDEO GAMES 1985-2019,"
COURTESY OF SCHWULES MUSEUM, BERLIN.

THE HERE AND NOW is a prison house,” wrote the late theorist and scholar José Muñoz. “We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potential.” Muñoz’s work, particularly his 2009 book, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, encourages us to consider queerness as a portal through which to reimagine time, space, and the body. His ideas, along with those of other theorists such as trans scholar Jack Halberstam’s art of queer failure, which embraces failing as a form of anticapitalist resistance, provide a framework for imagining worlds of multiplicity and equity. These are the kinds of worlds that today’s most avant-garde queer video-game designers are coding into existence.

Video games are a natural vehicle for world-building, but queering virtual worlds goes beyond including LGBTQ characters or storylines. Without considering the inclusivity of a game’s design mechanics or the labor force behind it, even the most well-meaning design can be reductive or tokenizing. In a study conducted for her book *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (2014), Dr. Adrienne Shaw, a Temple University professor and founder of the LGBTQ Video Game Archive, found that representation isn’t the primary demand for many queer gamers; *how* the game is made is equally important.

“We can think about queerness in relation to games in a way that goes beyond representation,” says Bonnie Ruberg, author of *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games* (2020). “You would miss so much of what was interesting if you only looked at the characters. The words, the cuts, the art.” Ruberg says that games, like literature, can be read through a queer lens, and perhaps more essentially, played in ways that are queer.

GAMING AS PRACTICE

In *Queer Games*, Ruberg explores the work of artists such as Dietrich “Squinky” Squinkifer, a Montreal-based transmasculine nonbinary designer whose games, including the award-winning *Dominique Pamplemousse*, examine gender, the economy, and relationships. Squinky’s deceptively simple game *Mx. Dressup* captivates me because it examines the ways we use clothing to both cover and reveal. On the right, a naked figure hovers with options to select different faces and skin tones. On the left, there’s a wily bedroom-floor pile of clothes and accessories.

Suddenly, I’m 13 and holed up in my best friend’s room primping to pop music in a cheap full-length mirror. We swap



shirts and pout to make sure our lip gloss is mirror-slick. My tiny hands tear at the perforated cutouts while I deliberate over each element of the doll’s outfit. Did the plaid skort *match* the flowered top? Or did it just *go*? Was *this* power clashing? For me, dressing was an exercise in developing an aesthetic. But if my possibilities were wrapped up in the clothes I had to choose from, then I was already limited in who I could imagine myself to be. Soon I began dreaming about clothes that didn’t exist—cuts and colors I’d never seen before.

As I sort through the possible visages and getups available on *Mx. Dressup*, I wonder if I should replicate myself or choose an avatar that’s the most unlike me. First I pick a face with the soft turquoise eyes I’ve always wanted but a too-girly-for-me pink lip and coral shadow. Next, I’m bookish with iridescent pants and long silver hair. Then I’m butch with a fauxhawk and a yellow dress. A lady gamer with a unicorn horn. A green octopus knitting an eight-armed scarf. In this closet, the possibilities are both absurd and instructive. I’m butch and baby. I don’t have to take off one outfit, hairstyle, animal suit, or pair of shoes to put on another. I can be an octopus and still wear a skirt.

While big-ticket games center on racking up points, unlocking levels, or shooting 'em dead, queer indie games often tweak or subvert not only traditional story lines but game mechanics.

(Opposite page) Exhibition view of "Rainbow Arcade."
Photo by Manuel Moncayo/Schwules Museum, Berlin.

It's this multitudinous quality—an imagining into a self and future not yet formed—that feels most queer about *Mx. Dressup*. “When I make games, I’m thinking less about trying to teach privileged people how to care about me and more about finding people who relate to my experiences in some way,” says Squinky. “Since being queer and trans is a process that involves some amount of self-discovery, I really like the idea of using my work to help others discover new things about themselves.”

Squinky, a self-taught developer, worked in commercial gaming for years before going to grad school to develop theoretical context and commercial appeal for their work. But even after being named a 2015 *Forbes* 30 Under 30 in Games—an honorific they met with suspicion (“Are these people really engaging with what I’m trying to say in my work, or are they just including me because it makes them look like they care about diversity?”)—they realized that even academic gaming was beholden to the economic influence of commercial or triple-A gaming (the blockbusters of the gaming world), which is primarily designed by and targeted toward cis white male players between the ages of 18 and 25. “The real tension is between video games as a commercial industry versus video games as an artistic practice,” says Squinky.

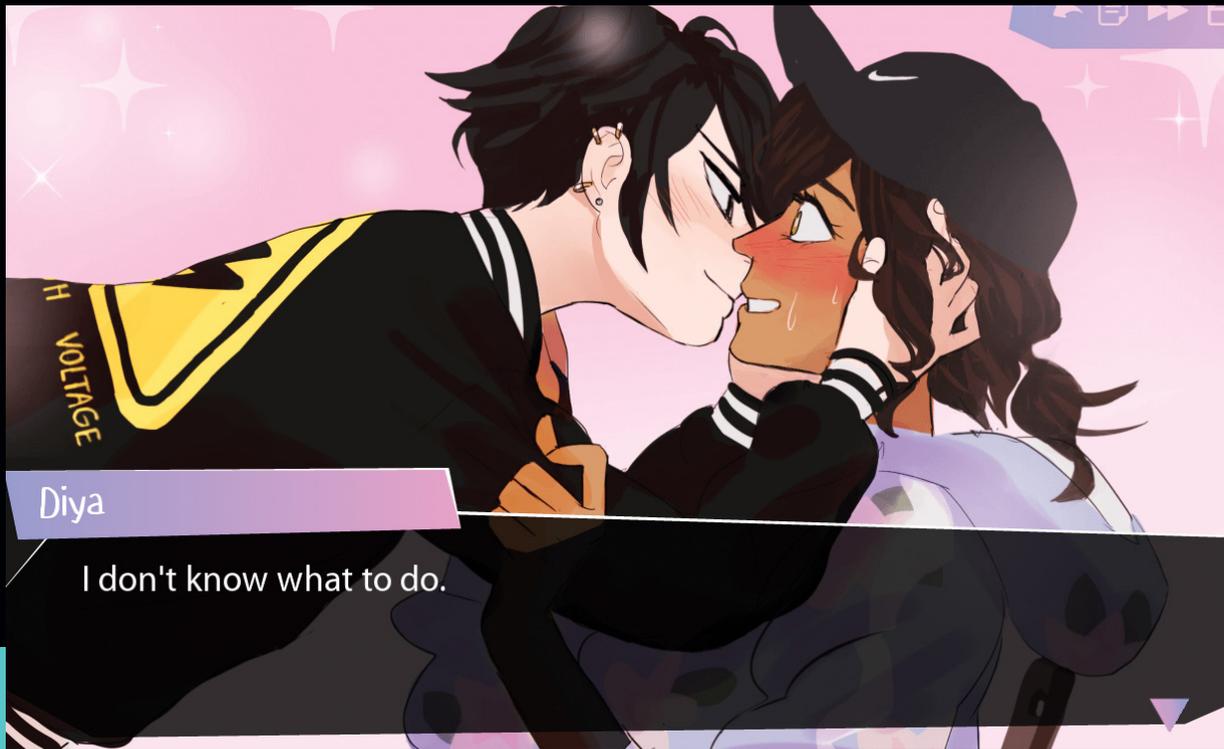
While big-ticket games center on racking up points, unlocking levels, or shooting 'em dead, queer indie games often tweak or subvert not only traditional story lines but game mechanics. Kara Stone, a queer scholar and designer of *Ritual of the Moon* (2019), strives



Exhibition view of "Rainbow Arcade."
Photography by Dr. Adrienne Shaw.

to create inclusive experiences that function on both crip and queer time—a concept articulated by University of California, Davis, professor Elizabeth Freeman in her 2010 book *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Queer lives, writes Freeman, often lack the “chrononormativity” of their straight counterparts: If cis hetero lives unfold in a preset chronology—school, love, marriage, mortgage, children, etc.—and time is recorded and advanced in a linear manner according to those benchmarks, in queered lives, time may loop, bend, or splinter. Adolescence might be delayed; marriage might be undesirable or unattainable; and family may often be collaged from friends and chosen community.

In a traditional video game, players advance chronologically, collecting points and powers along the way. In order to access the next level, they have to complete a series of ascendingly difficult



Butterfly Soup, 2017, USA. Designer, Brianna Lei.

tasks or slay some gnarly beast before the clock runs out. “Video games are a time-based medium,” says Stone. “So many are designed to frustrate you and then reward you, which keeps you playing and playing.” The mainstream gaming model, she explains, reinforces capitalist patriarchal ideals by, for example, requiring 80 straight hours of playthrough to “win.”

As I become the protagonist in Stone’s *Ritual of the Moon*, time goes gossamer. A witch exiled to a distant planet, I pace the dusty surface of a moon and gaze into a galaxy of origami paper stars. With its handcrafted aesthetic and neo-witch trial storyline, *Ritual* is both futuristic and folkloric. Needlepoint narrations illustrate my inner dialogue, softening the digital feel of a video game into something more like sepia-toned stop-motion. Inspired by Stone’s experience of psychosocial illness and journaling to understand her own cycles, *Ritual* is played in short, ritualized bursts once a day for 30 days, and it asks gamers to make an emotional decision each day and record their results. “It allows you to check in with yourself,” Stone says. “I can go, okay, I destroyed the earth seven days in a row. Now, why did I do that?” On Stone’s distant moon, self-care and survival are intertwined. Knowing the self is not a luxury.

THE FALLACY OF BODY-MIND DIVIDE

In grad school, I often struggled to articulate myself in the intellectual sound bites that seemed to come easily to my peers. My knowledge, lived and felt, was stored as amorphous tangles in my body. Because I was not fluent in the language of the academy, I assumed my ideas, too, must be less substantial. I didn’t know then about the 17th-century French philosopher René Descartes and his theory of dualism, which states that the intellect can exist apart from the body that houses it. This Cartesian dualism has long been weaponized against marginalized bodies and the knowledge they carry. But the intersectional undercurrent of the queer gaming avant-garde bucks against this—calling instead for the inclusion of the corporeal in how games are both built and engaged with. “The community around queer games is mixed,” says Ruberg. “A lot of people didn’t graduate college, but they represent deep conceptual thinking through the body.”

Jimmy Andrews and Loren Schmidt’s *Realistic Kissing Simulator* is a two-player game that simulates a make-out session in

What if the same amount of research went into coding a gay cuddling game as it does into designing weapons?

which the only activities are operating a tongue with two keys, requesting or giving consent, and deciding when the kiss is over. Like *Mx. Dressup*, the apparent simplicity of the game veils its existential questions. What is the point of making out, actually? Is there a goal? And if not, why have a game about it? “What if the point isn’t to win,” asks Ruberg, “but to explore or connect?” By achieving nothing, at least nothing in terms of how the capitalist values of triple-A gaming—win, conquer, defeat—are defined, these games are not only acts of resistance but sites of freedom.

“It’s a matter of treating games like any other public sphere,” says Robert Yang, a designer and professor at New York University’s Game Center, whose explicit games about gay culture and intimacy are routinely banned on Twitch, the world’s biggest livestream gaming platform. “If games are art, and art reflects humanity, then why are there so few sex and romance games? Pride marches, HIV activism, sex-work advocacy—all these queer projects are about why public sexuality matters and why personal politics matter. If we hide our sexuality, that means straight people define what our sexuality means.”

In Yang’s *The Tearoom* (2017), I step into a man’s body as I shuffle into a harshly lit bathroom with dark graffitied walls and bare hanging bulbs. I step up to a deep, shining

urinal, or what Yang described in his artist’s statement as the “Cadillac of urinals.” The game uses a flashy big-money design element that typically marks high-budget games but in Yang’s case is almost tongue-in-cheek. A queer-ass game built in the style of a slick first-person shooter. Pissing is just a pretext for being in the tearoom, but still, I go for what feels like a very long time. Another man walks in. I look. He looks. We look away. Here, the act of looking is loaded and consent is a silent motion. We repeat this dance until he approaches and silently pulls out his cock. It’s a gun. I wonder if the gun is loaded, wonder what’s going to happen, but there’s no talking here, so I kneel and suck. Police sirens wail. It’s a setup. As I’m handcuffed, a country track replaces the crickets. “Find some more girls,” twang the Lonesome Billies.

Based on a 1962 sting operation in a Mansfield, Ohio, public bathroom (or tearoom), Yang’s game isn’t just a historical snapshot of cruising and its policing. It’s a comment on the capitalistic violent tendencies of the gaming industry. The triple-A game world has spent decades perfecting the code for realistic gun feel, leaving little space for games of intimacy like Yang’s, which are censored with such regularity that he turned cocks into the only thing he knew the industry wouldn’t ban: guns.

What if the same amount of research went into coding a gay cuddling game as it does into designing weapons? While the soft-body flexibility necessary for cuddling is harder for a computer to simulate, Yang says this is not a simple technical issue. All games have a point of view embedded in them. Coding is political. “Games need an intervention,” says Stone. “They need to be designed for more than white men.” But can virtual play actually create change in our analog lives? Gaming critic, designer, and activist Mattie Brice says yes. “Play can slip into reality rather easily. Like an inside joke between friends becoming popular vernacular. Take any phrase originating from Black women or queer folk that everyone now uses, like slay or shade. It’s through this slippage that utopia has its chance to change the present.” By performing utopia, Brice has said, the body gains memory of it.

From the bare-bones design of *Realistic Kissing Simulator* to the hyperrealism of *The Tearoom*, the what and how of these games affirm that body and mind are channels for resistance. Wouldn’t it be nice, asks Yang, if a game were less of a destination and more of a haunt? What does it mean though to be haunted by a game? “A haunt stays with us,” he says. “A haunt resists resolution and bleeds into our lives, until we can’t help but think about it. A haunting game means you don’t have to play it because you’re already playing it, just by thinking about it.”

Nina St. Pierre is a queer culture writer and essayist based in New York City who explores feminism, art, and spirituality but will follow any story that haunts her.