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The Videoludic Cyborg : Queer/Feminist Reappropriations and Hybridity

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Introduction

Video game culture is heavily tainted with militarized masculinity and has therefore often been described as toxic (Consalvo 2012). The state of this world, which is vastly harmful to women, people of color and marginalized people, could be explained by the military-industrial origins of video games. Indeed, "interactive game designers and marketers, starting from an intensely militarized institutional incubator, forged a deep connexion with their youthful core male gaming *aficionados*, but failed or ignored other audiences and gaming options" (Kline et al. 2003: 265). What Kline et al. called militarized masculinity is in fact a hegemonic discourse, or a dominant theme, of a "shared semiotic nexus revolving around issues of war, conquest and combat", or "militarist subtexts of conquest and imperialism" (Kline et al. 2003: 255), which ultimately resulted in evacuating marginalized people and diversity in video games to the benefit of similar content, primarily addressing a white cishet men audience. There are many incidents of harassment, violence, racism, sexism in video game content, and in many video game communities. As Consalvo said,

> Each event taken in isolation is troubling enough, but chaining them together into a timeline demonstrates how the individual links are not actually isolated incidents at all but illustrate a pattern of a misogynistic gamer culture and patriarchal privilege attempting to (re)assert its position. (Consalvo 2012)

However, there is an increasing feminist and queer resistance in both video game creation and gaming practices. For example, the SSL Nagbot collective highlight that feminist hacking practices are, "among hacking communities, [...] sociotechnical practices of soldering hardware, writing computer code, or building software applications are viewed as a force for not only direct technical change but more importantly for direct social change." (SSL Nagbot 2016).

Hacking, or feminist modding in video games, is an obvious act of feminist resistance, because the very structure of the game is modified for political and activist means. For example, Rachel Simone Well, in her "Hello Kitty World" work, presents a mod that replaces Mario by Hello Kitty in the 1985 Super Mario Bros. The goal of this mod is to add socially constructed feminine attributes to roles usually associated with masculinity. Even without changing the very structure of the game, playing can be a political act, by actively and consciously choosing to endorse a feminist stance (we can choose to consciously play a lesbian relationship in *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007-2012) or *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment 2015), for example, or to refuse traditional gender roles in many JRPGs by giving female characters physical strength or by exploiting the rules of the game).

Feminist resistance is also possible in game design. Faced with homogeneity of the video game landscape, several creators and marginalized people are trying to reclaim the space by resorting to several political and technological tactics in order to set up direct social change. The *AltGames* movement appropriates video game conventions to create radically different objects from typical games. This creative process and appropriation tactic can be situated within the queer game studies paradigm (Ruberg and Shaw 2017), which proposes to understand games as a system of pleasure, power dynamics and possibilities. Games are conceived as a space within which players are allowed to explore and subvert rules, thus shifting the focus from the content of games to their very essence. Ultimately, queerness interrogates the notion of social norms and subverts them by being voluntarily counter-cultural (Halberstam 2011). The queering of games can also be seen as a way to perform a virtual identity, to explore the notion of the self in a disembodied form where rules are defined by a computerized entity and not by a physical one. In this presentation, we will seek to highlight the ways in which the AltGames movement is in line with posthumanist and transhumanist theories, including Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg (1991), which poses the idea of a feminist and queer resistance within the space between the individual and the machine, as well as Morton's idea of the cyberqueer (1995) and Wakeford's theorization of the cyberqueer identity (2000, 2002). This multifaceted phenomenon offers a unique opportunity for the conceptualization of the self, aiming to imagine a post-human identity which transcends the physical norms and space, to the benefit of individuals and groups who subvert the norms of cisgendered masculine heterosexuality (Wakeford, 1997, 2000, 2002). In this sense, the AltGames movement could be seen as part of a posthumanist movement that aims to recrystallize identity within a virtual space, thus getting rid of physical imperatives of identity performativity. We will argue that some games pertaining to the *AltGames* movement constitute a radically subversive form, approaching the ideal of Haraway's cyborg and Morton and Wakeford's cyberqueer identity.

Cyborg, cyberqueer and posthumanism

In 1984, Haraway publishes "A Cyborg Manifesto", where she first theorizes the idea of the cyborg as a feminist utopia. She writes that the "cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. [...] The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion." (Haraway 1991: 149). In this short paragraph, the author highlights three critical aspects of her idea of the cyborg: (1) it is constituted of both organic and technological components; (2) it blurs the boundaries between fiction and social reality (distinguished here from biological reality); and (3) it defies both biological and social binary oppositions with regards to identity construction (Wolmark 1999). Most importantly, Haraway's cyborg challenges the idea of "white feminism", which focuses primarily on white, heterosexual biological women: the cyborg as a utopian concept transcends sex, gender, and race but also questions biological imperatives limiting identity construction. Similarly, Wolmark argues that Haraway's cyborg also "disrupts the gendered power relations of technology" (Wolmark 1999: 232), which have also reinforced the patriarchal order. Springer, drawing on Hyussen's work, notes that starting in the 19th Century, after the industrial revolution, technology is often associated with femininity and feminine sexuality in the collective imagination. Although men produce, own, and control technological artifacts, technology itself is

associated with feminine and “threatening entities capable of vast, uncontrollable destruction” (Wolmark 1999: 36). Mostly realized in popular culture and science fiction works, this idea of an uncontrollable feminine strength incarnated in a technological form is incredibly common: from *Her* (Spike Jonze, 2013)’s Samantha to *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014)’s Ava, examples of dangerously powerful technological beings presented as feminine entities are plentiful. Although interesting, this idea reinforces binary gendered power dynamics and omits to account for a variety of queer experiences, thus proving the importance of situating the concept of the cyborg in a transcending space.

Although Haraway’s cyborg seems to offer a promising avenue to think about the intersections of sex, gender, and race at the crossroads of technological and biological functions, her work remains to this day - almost 30 years later - mostly conceptual. Indeed, Paradis argues that "disembodied performance has faded in the face of the inescapably raced, sexed, and gendered body" (Paradis 2009: 447), thus preventing Haraway's cyborg utopia from materializing. Faced with both the lingering technological difficulties associated with cyberware integration to the human body as well as the inevitable reminders of heteronormativity in what cyberpunk literature calls “meatspace”, that is, the physical world, the idea of the cyberqueer emerged. Tudor states that the cyberqueer is “the ultimate manifestation of queer theory, as it was seen to transcend the physical world in a parallel space, where [one] freely and flexibly could pick and choose who to be” (Tudor 2012: 6). The cyberqueer identity refers to individuals and groups who subvert heteronormativity by performing their identity as a fluid, thus subverting binary social norms, and do so using the many possibilities brought by the democratization of the internet and virtual worlds. Although the cyberqueer movement is a very loose one, mainly characterized by the idea of queerness in a virtual space, Wakeford (2002) identifies four main themes associated with cyberqueer research: (1) identity and self-presentation of queer folks; (2) the creation of a queer space; (3) the electronic facilitation of a queer virtual community; and (4) new technology and erotic practices. Although alternative game creation practices are extremely diverse, as we aim to show in the next section with the example of the AltGames movement, all of these crucial aspects of the cyberqueer movement are also key to understanding the how games can be part of a hybrid virtual identity.

Thus, drawing from Haraway’s cyborg utopia as well as from the cyberqueer movement, we propose that subversive games and autobiographical games could constitute a form of posthuman being, a sort of mind-uploaded state of cyberbeing. This presentation does not aim at offering a definition of what is posthumanism, nor does it claim to propose a model of the posthuman being - rather, it draws from a variety of definitions (Foucault, Wolfe, Hayles, Bostrom) in order to think of videoludic creation as a means of recrystallizing identity in the cyberspace, thus nearing a form of posthumanist utopia. More importantly, we work from Wolfe’s idea that “‘the human’ is achieved [...] by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether”. In order to distinguish between transhumanist and posthumanist thoughts, the author adds that “posthumanism is the opposite of transhumanism, and in this light, transhumanism should be seen as an *intensification* of humanism” (Wolfe 2010: xiv, xv).

AltGames

AltGames, especially subversive and autobiographical games, as a form of posthumanism being, are quite a recent video game movement. Although they derive from what Jesper Juul call casual games (Juul 2010), they are more than just casual games. They fill Juul's five components that are common to casual games: they have emotionally positive fictions (1), they do not require knowledge of video game conventions or specific skills (2), they do not demand commitment and are interruptible (3), they have merciful punishments for failing (4), and they sometimes show excessive positive feedback for every successful action the player performs (5) (Juul 2010: 50).

However, they also have distinct components, that makes them more than simple "casual games". AltGames are part of a recent feminist and queer movement in video game communities. Few academic researchers have tackled the subject so far, mainly because of the elusive nature of the movement. For the purposes of this presentation, we humbly propose to use our partial definition which we offered last year at the Game History Symposium in Montreal. Our observations are made in a formalist perspective, mostly from players discourse on social networking platforms, such as *Twitter* and game analysis. AltGames are subversive gaming and creation practices that emerged in the early 2010s, especially on the *itch.io* website, similar to *Steam*. Even though the start of the hashtag #AltGames can be traced back to around 2009, AltGames as a movement seem to have emerged in 2014, around the same time as the toxic #GamerGate saga, opposing mainstream and indie games.

Although the label itself can and is used by many non-marginalized designers aiming to create radically different games, the AltGames community mostly unites marginalized people, which strongly links them to the idea of the cyberqueer. We can trace back their origins to previous alternative movements and subversive practices in the video games community, all emerging in the early 21th century; the Scratchware Manifesto, the Realtime Art and the NotGames movements all share similarities with the AltGames movement.

From the early 2000, the Scratchware Manifesto tends to want to get away from the AAA industry. The anonymous authors of the manifesto, AAA game developers, were inspired by the Cyberpunk Manifesto signed by Christian As. Kirtchev in 1997, keeping in mind the spirit of protest to advocate generic diversity in video games. By writing "Death to the gaming industry! Long live games. ", the authors of the manifesto advocate for smaller teams or even individual creators who create more personal experiences using "scratchware", meaning quality computer games created by a micro-team. They can be played by everyone and they are short (from 15 min. to 1 hour). They can be replayed and they are satisfactory. They are also created from reduced budgets - hence the idea of "scratch", "trash" symbolic. However, the Scratchware Manifesto can also be interpreted as a genesis of indie games.

The Realtime Art Manifesto defends an artistic vision of video games. Written in 2006 by Harvey and Samyn, the manifesto essentially echoes the Scratchware Manifesto's challenge to the traditional idea of AAA video games - even if they do not directly refer to it. The idea of a videogame "author" emerges in the manifesto, and rejects consumerism by saying "stop making games, be an author" (Harvey and Samyn 2006). That sentence could even be interpreted as "stop being a worker; be an artist". Inspired by poetry, the authors of the manifesto also say "Make short and intense games: think haiku, not epic. Think poetry, not prose." (Harvey and Samyn 2006). The manifesto, detailed in 10 points, speaks of the actual video game experience enabled by 3D technology and creating an interactive artistic experience, as well as the reaffirmation of a

"punk" economy. Even the distribution system is designed according to an alternative economy where authors are asked to make their games accessible to all types of audience.

Finally, the NotGames manifesto, signed by Michaël Samyn (who is also one of the authors of the Realtime Art Manifesto), is getting closer to the ideal of AltGames. Samyn suggests that, rather than being a genre, NotGames are both a design challenge and an artistic challenge. The question isn't whether or not games are an artistic object, but rather creators should aim to produce "an experience that consists only of [...] beautiful moments?" (Samyn 2010) that exploits the potential of the medium by rejecting traditional ways of making games. NotGames should provide the most complete gaming experience to the player.

From these historical predecessors, we can finally try to define AltGame, based on social networking discourse and game content, by proposing that they exist at the intersection of four main components: artistic, economical, political and ludic. Practices regrouped under the AltGames label may be illustrated in one or all of these components; a game does not need to be representative of all four components to be an AltGame.

Artistic component

AltGames can often be seen as aesthetically distinct from mainstream, indie or AAA games - ideals of photorealism are often neglected or even completely rejected. In this respect, designers concerned with the artistic aspect of alternative games aim to create works of art, and many will stray away from established convention in the video game world. For the sake of this presentation, we will concentrate on some key games which are in line with feminist and queer ideals, but aesthetic choices are numerous and personal to each creator. Some openly feminist or subversive AltGames - but not all of them - put forward an aesthetic which is radically distinct from militarized masculinity. Games such as such as *Morning Make Up Madness* (2016), and *Unipug* (2016) by Jenny Jiao Hsia put forward a "cute aesthetic", almost cartoonesquely bubbly and feminine, which aims to contrast with established standards in the AAA industry. The "radical softness aesthetic, a feminist idea that use feminine stereotypes that are often regarded as weak and use them in a subversive way to show strength, is also often put forward in queer AltGames.

Aside from the visual aspects of aesthetic considerations, the idea of communicating a personal experience or an emotional sensation is often central to the experience of AltGames. The reflexive process is an integral part of some creators' artistic approach. The artist and her experiences are an essential part of the game.

Ludic component

Most AltGames also question traditional game mechanics, and the ideas of play/game themselves. Artists try to "break" game mechanics and videoludic norms. Some experiences are often very short, like in *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (Anthropy 2013), which lasts only 10 seconds, or the ludic possibilities are limited, such as in *Freshman Year* (Freeman 2015). The idea of games having to be fun, pleasant or fulfilling experiences for the player is often questioned. Quinn, in her article "Punk Games" (Quinn 2015), wrote "So fucking what if it isn't fun?", asking if a game *must* be ludic.

Game mechanics themselves are often more accessible than traditional video games: most games have simplified mechanics which require few previous gaming experiences to master, and the learning curve is thus reduced for very casual or new players. Considering most AltGames are computer games, some can even be played only with a mouse, making the required motor skills very basic compared with the traditional console controller. Hypertextual games, for example, require few resources to be played and have been increasingly popular in the past years with platforms such as Twine being readily accessible. Overall, AltGames create new videoludic experiences using the specificities of the medium.

Economical component

Similarly to the ludic component, the economical aspect mainly consists of the rejection of traditional means of production commercialization, distinguishing AltGames from AAA and indie games. Game creation, in that sense, doesn't depend on financial imperatives and profitability of the game, even though, as Lana Polansky, a game developer, notes on *Twitter*, AltGames artists should ideally be able to make a living from their work. Instead of selling individual games on traditional platforms such as *Steam*, some marginalized AltGames creators prefer setting up crowdfunding platforms like *Patreon* and *Ko-Fi*, adopting a strategy more akin to artist patronage than commercial capitalist practices. Thus, instead of buying individual ludic experiences, the AltGames player takes place within a wider social ludic system. Other artists choose to sell their individual games on alternative platforms such as itch.io, for lower prices, or offer pay-what-you-can program which allows players to compensate the artist before or after their experience, according to their financial means.

Another important aspect which was briefly mentioned in the last section is the crucial notion of the accessibility of the means of production. For the aforementioned patronage system to be sustainable, the financial investment on the part of creators must also be reasonable - hence the importance of free creation platforms (such as *Twine*, *Construct2*, *Renpy*, etc.) for the AltGames movement. These few examples are either free or affordable, and do not necessarily require high-level programming or computer science skills to be used.

Politic component

Finally, the political aspect is probably the most crucial to a sound definition of AltGames, since one could arguably state that all AltGames are essentially political : through artistic, ludic and economical means, artists and creators question the established social and political order. AltGames are an act of resistance, whether or not the content of the games themselves is political.

When observing the work of marginalized folks specifically within the game design community, the the idea of reclaiming the videoludic medium is also important - myriad creators of AltGames are marginalized, both by the video game industry and society at large. As such, the content of a lot of these artists' games is explicitly political or aims at exploring a political issue.

Most queer and feminist creators use their own personal experiences and struggles to convey political messages. For example, Nina Freeman represents her personal experiences through games that use the vignette format, a concept borrowed from literature, which consists of a brief and evocative episode that plunges directly into the heart of the experience in order to generate a strong reaction in the player (Blyth in Priestman 2014). The power of this format lies in its ability

to evoke, to incite the reader or player to imagine a story that leads to the moment described in the vignette. Nina Freeman, for example, in her game *Freshman Year* (2015), tries to portray the experience of a sexual assault through the themes and dialogues, but especially with the mechanics that removes the player's agency.

AltGames and the queer cyborg

AltGames are part of the cyberqueer movement because they subvert social norms, mainly heteronormativity, through virtual means of expression and distribution that transcend physical space - they create communities where marginalized people can think and discuss their experiences.

Some practices of the AltGames movement can be seen as a continuation of the posthumanist idea of mind uploading, the actual uploading of consciousness, which sees identity as a construction that is not necessarily linked to the body. Zoe Quinn's creations such as *Depression Quest* (2013) or Freeman's vignettes could very well be part of this posthumanist idea, in that they allow not only a virtualisation of an experience but also a blurring of boundaries between binary concepts such as gender identity, reality and fiction, or the idea of self-realization.

Nina Freeman's game *Cibele* (2015) is an exploration of a fragment of her memories, her virtual relationships, and the exploration of intimacy and eroticism in a virtual world. The boundaries between reality and fiction are doubly blurred: the game explores the creator's memories via a virtual world, which is a representation of the one in which she herself has lived these experiences. Freeman has reproduced a virtual relational space within a gaming world as virtual as the one in which the player will experience her memories.

Conclusion

The link between posthumanist philosophy and the idea of mind uploading in a video game is even clearer when Freeman openly plays with her own memories by adding old selfies in the game world. These can be akin to the idea of "self-downloading", and we could also see this as a form of inverted cyborg: whereas Haraway’s cyborg aims for the inclusion of cyberware to the human body, Freeman includes an organic component within a technological body. The author recreates a fragment of her identity within a completely virtual space and goes beyond the bounds of organic corporeality by using the cybernetic components to re-form herself as a virtual-real hybrid identity.

AltGames, in their current form and ever evolving, fit - or at least have the potential to fit - in the ideal of Haraway's cyborg and Wakeford's cyberqueer. They blur the gender boundaries, erase binarity by performing fluid identities and subvert heteronormativity through the Internet by taking advantage of accessible means of distribution. They even thrive in forming communities of marginalized people who interact with each other, as Wakeford theorized, gaining a visibility never obtained before. Virtualized self-expression succeeds in transcending physical space, thus recrystallizing identity which could ultimately eliminate physical imperatives of gender and identity performativity.

Games

CIBELE. Nina Freeman, PC, Mac, 2015.
DEPRESSION QUEST. Zoe Quinn, PC, Mac 2013.
FRESHMAN YEAR. Nina Freeman, PC, Mac 2015
HELLO KITTY WORLD. Rachel Simone Weil, HACKING/ MODDING/ REMIXING as Feminist Protest Expo, Carnegie Mellon University, 2016.
LIFE IS STRANGE. Dontnod Entertainment, PC, Mac, Linux, PlayStation, Xbox, 2015.
MASS EFFECT. BioWare, PC, PlayStation, Xbox, Wii, 2007-2012.
MORNING MAKE UP MADNESS. Jenny Jiao Hsia, PC, Mac, Linux, 2016.
QUEERS IN LOVE AT THE END OF THE WORLD. Anna Anthropy, PC, Mac, 2013.
UNIPUG. Jenny Jiao Hsia, PC, Mac, Linux, 2016.

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